

## song of dying stars

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# song of dying stars

by [andromedabennet](#)

## Summary

His first dreams are of the darkness that frightens him and a little girl who can call to the light.

He makes it his mission to find her, no matter what it might cost.

[or: an alternate *creation of the fold* story]

## Notes

This story starts before Demon in the Wood with a *very young* Aleksander. As a result, he is basically nothing like his canon self in this chapter. Obviously that will change as he ages, though I'd argue that knowing Alina for more of his life means that, while he will have a darker streak for sure, it won't manifest in the exact same ways as it does in canon.

This is my first darklina fic (and first grishaverse fic in general), so I'm excited and nervous to share it.

Moodboard by [helloeurydice](#).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

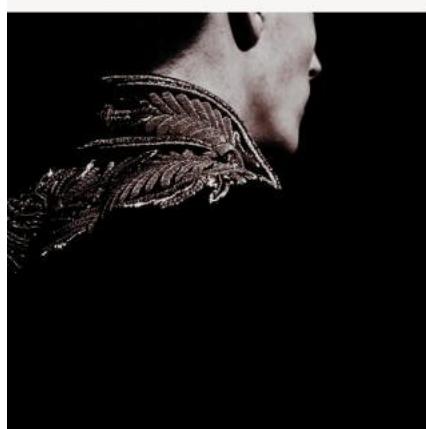
# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

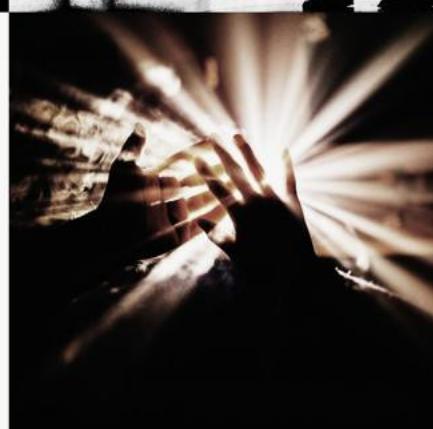
See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



*might be  
a sinner  
and i  
might be  
a saint*



"Sleep," she says.  
"I'll fight the bad dreams off if they  
come to get you."



Long before his dreams have words or faces — before he can speak or comprehend the world around him, only a babe carried close to his mother's chest — they are filled by darkness, darkness, *darkness*. Darkness and a flash of warm, shining gold.

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He doesn't remember the first time.

His earliest days are a haze of running and confusion that set the tone for the rest of his life.

His name, he thinks, must be Aleksander. It's what his *madraya* told him, and yet she always calls him something else. The last one was Igor? Or was it Oleg? The names blur together so much that sometimes he can't help but throw a tantrum, crying hard enough that his face turns an ugly shade of red, all because he can't remember what she is meant to call him.

His *madraya* always sighs, but he doesn't understand why.

*It is dangerous out there for us*, she whispers to him in the night, sometimes while they are running and sometimes while they are safe in a bed.

More often than not, they are running.

*It is dangerous out there for us*. She says it as a reminder, the whispered words in the dark to remind him that he must always be good, must always listen to her and do as she orders. They often leave at a moment's notice, but he doesn't understand the reasoning. He is only six, and the world around him is cold and confusing.

Igor? Maksim? Aleksander? The names begin to mash together into meaningless sounds more and more, and he can hardly remember which he is meant to answer to. One of them, he is sure, belongs to him the way his hair belongs to him, the way that the shadows that spring from his fingertips do. But he never seems to know which anymore.

In one town he is called Pasha, but in the next town, he forgets that it is no longer his name. He tries to answer to it when someone is calling for the boy down the street, and the boy's mother gives him a strange look. He is meant to be Evgeni, after all.

His *madraya* calls him *moi schast'ye*, my happiness, if only to allow the pet name to remain a constant in his life. The way she says it though, through pursed lips and with a subtle bite, makes him wonder if it's true.

He wants to be her happiness — wants to be the good boy that she is always commanding him to be. He will not touch anyone, or talk about his shadows, or try to use the Cut.

(He doesn't even know how he would do the Cut. His pudgy little fists are untrained and shaky with fear, but still his mother reminds him not to try around others. It will cause a scene if he manages it. She says the words with the experience of one who performed it at an age even younger than his own, even if he can't yet hear that in her tone.)

In the chaos of his life, running from one temporary haven to another, he loses track of the first dream. It must've been when he was very small.

But the first time he remembers — the first true dream — there is darkness. The black of the forests they travel through, with only the faint light of the moon illuminating the branches of

the trees above them, spindly fingers reaching up into the sky with their talons. The sight makes him shiver.

And then there is a hand on his shoulder, and it isn't until then that he notices he's crying. The teartracks cut lines down his cheeks, but the darkness might've hidden them if not for his own small sniffle.

“Who—”

He turns, knowing that no hand should be there. It's one of his first rules, the earliest law he's ever answered to. No one touches ~~Igor~~ Aleksander Morozova, at least not if he wants to live.

“Why are you crying?”

“I'm not,” he responds petulantly, even as a fist comes up to rub at his eyes. His *madraya* would hate to see him like this. Crying, she says, is for the weak. Her child is not weak, and he shouldn't act like it. He will be as strong as he allows himself to be, hampered by nothing but his own ambition.

He only half understands what she means when she gives these talks.

“Yes you are.”

The voice is curious rather than judgmental. A girl, he thinks. Like Marya in the last town, the little blonde girl he hadn't been allowed to play with. She'd been the laundress's daughter, and the laundress had done a protective hand gesture across her chest each time she had seen the two Morozovas passing by.

They hadn't stayed in that town for longer than two weeks before disappearing again.

“I'm—” *not*, he wants to repeat. He is nothing if not a stubborn child. Instead, he finishes with a too honest, “—afraid of the dark.”

He says the words with a heavy coating of shame. His mother would be appalled to know that her child, who she has raised to be above fear except for what the *otkazat'sya* might do to them if he isn't careful. Of what might happen if he doesn't learn how to defend himself before they come for him.

“I am too,” she whispers.

The hand on his shoulder moves to take his, and he lets her, even though he knows that he shouldn't. He can feel the way the touch tingles, a sort of humming between them. She is Grisha, this girl in the forest. His touch amplifies whatever powers are locked away beneath her skin.

She doesn't say anything even though she must feel it. Perhaps she has never heard the word *amplifier* before. Perhaps, like some children, she doesn't even know yet that she's Grisha. He watches her with wide eyes, trying to understand this child with brown hair and buzzing skin, the one who is afraid of the dark but sits with him in it anyway.

Then she turns her other hand over so it sits palm up on her folded knee. She looks so assured, and for a second he expects to see something sitting there — a little candy maybe, hidden away after a lavish meal.

Instead, a ball of light springs forth, warm and soft and golden. It illuminates the planes of her face, throwing shadows at the places that it cannot touch.

“I— how?” He asks, staring at it with wide eyes. He has seen his *madraya* do any number of impossible things. He should be used to surprises by now, but he’s never seen this. He’s never seen someone who can hold a star in her hand.

“I don’t know. But now you don’t have to be afraid.”

He reaches out to poke it, a single finger that is entirely too trusting. His mother would scold him for trying to burn it off, but when he makes contact, it is only faintly warm, like the memory of a fire. The feeling is a comfort.

He stares at it in silence while she watches him, both content to observe.

The darkness around them suddenly isn’t so frightening, though her light stays just around the two of them. Even with the trees’ haggard, gnarled branches reaching out to snatch him away, he knows that the light will protect them. Inside this bubble, unlike anywhere else in Ravka and the rest of the world, he is safe.

His mother would smack his head if he told her that. The light in the forest is only a beacon for hunters and trackers to find them — to discover the witches in the wood and burn them, or study them, or sell them. Even still he does not tell the girl to put it out. The light calls to him, a little monster finally finding warmth after so long. He wants to feel this way if only for a bit longer.

So though they hardly speak, she sits with him, one hand in his and the other holding the sun.

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It’s not until he wakes up, disoriented in an unfamiliar inn after several days of travel to their next destination, that he realizes none of it happened. The girl, the light, the touch — they were all a dream.

He will never have that. Never know the feeling of a hand sliding into his own unless it’s his *madraya*’s. Never know the comforting feeling of existing where his own darkness can’t touch.

Though they walk for the whole of the next week, feet blistering in their boots and lips cracking in the cold, he never tells his mother of the dream.

She would only say that it isn't wise to rely on dreams for comfort. In this world, the only thing they can rely on is what they create for themselves.

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He doesn't see her again for a long time. Long enough to be Petyr and Ivan and Anatoly. He forgets what his name used to be before those, the memory of four towns ago long since faded in his mind. The girl fades too, turning more into a feeling than a face. There had once been a night when he hadn't been afraid. Where someone had reached out to him and shown him kindness. But that is all he knows. The rest is dust, the way all the things in his life will one day be.

His *madraya* tells him that often — the only thing permanent in their lives is each other, and even then only if they are careful. The people they meet, the fears they face, even the golden warmth of his dreams are all a passing moment. He will outlive them all.

It's not something he can yet comprehend, but he tries to. When he meets a boy in Shu Han who asks him to play hide and seek, he tries to picture him as a skeleton in the ground when he says *no thank you*. His mother's watchful eyes are on him the entire time.

There will be no games here, no accidental touches.

He thinks of the laundress's daughter from a few towns back — *Marfa? Marya?* — and sees only the crows that will pick at a desiccated body. He will live forever if he can outsmart his attackers, and they will not.

Even to a child, it never stops being an unsettling thought.

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It takes a long time for him to see her again, but when she finally returns, the memory of meeting her floods back to him.

*She's the girl*, he calls. *The little girl with the ball of light*.

He must be seven or eight by now, but it doesn't matter. Time is meaningless when you spend the whole of it running. It's all his mother has ever known: eight hundred years of hiding herself.

Maybe it's all he'll ever know too.

The only hope he has of something different is when he sees the girl.

“You’re back.” The words are an awed whisper, like he’s seeing a ghost. She had become almost a legend to his own mind, something less than human. You can’t miss something if it isn’t real.

“I didn’t go anywhere, silly.”

“It’s been—” *weeks, months, years* “—a long time since the last dream.”

“Dream?”

He gives her a confused look. “This isn’t real. It’s a dream — didn’t you know?”

Unbothered, she shrugs. “I don’t know. It seems as real as anything else.”

“You meet strangers in the woods all the time?”

She giggles, pushing a stray bit of hair back behind her ear. “Yes, sometimes. Not in the woods, but there are always kids here.”

“Kids? Lots of them?”

His heart aches at the thought. Even in bigger settlements with plenty of children, he has to keep his distance. His mother’s words follow him everywhere.

“Yes! So many kids! Too many, sometimes. I don’t even know all of their names.”

For the first time, he takes notice of their surroundings. They’re sitting in the grass by a big tree, the sky blue and endless above them. He wonders if this is her dream that he’s fallen into this time. He doesn’t dream of places like this.

Maybe her light is radiating out to color the scene.

“What’s your name?”

His hand sits on the grass between them, and he can’t help but hope that she might unthinkingly reach out and touch it. He wants to feel that human warmth again.

She goes to answer, but the words stick in her mouth.

“I’m— I—” She pokes her tongue out like she’s trying to get something unwanted off of it. “I’m— Well what’s *your* name?”

He doesn’t remember. Sometimes he goes weeks on end without ever remembering that he has another name. Isn’t it Anatoly this time?

No, it’s something else.

*Aleksander.*

His *madraya* would be mad at him for forgetting again.

But when he tries to say the name, letting its unfamiliar syllables roll off his tongue, he can't force them out. They are as lost to him as the name itself usually is.

“I’m—”

“See?”

“See what?”

“Something’s weird about this place,” she says in her wispy voice. “I can’t say mine, either.”

*Merzost*, his mind automatically supplies. His *madraya*’s disdain for *merzost* is obvious, and it has become an easy scapegoat for anything he doesn’t quite understand.

Maybe that’s what this dream is, if it really isn’t just something that his mind is creating on its own.

If she really is there — if there truly is a little girl with brown hair who can hold the sun in her hands — then it must be some kind of abomination that has brought them together. Something wrong, and that’s why they can’t say their names.

“Sasha,” he says quickly, not letting the thought even take root in his head before it’s already in the air between them.

“Sasha?”

He’s never been called Sasha before, although he’s also never been called Aleksander. Both are equally unfamiliar to him, but neither is untrue. One is just slightly less true, allowing it to slip through whatever is forcing their silence.

His mother would be proud of him for outsmarting something. He isn’t *not* Sasha.

“Yes, Sasha.”

“Okay. I’m...”

She pauses, tapping her chin with her small finger.

“You’re *solnishka*, obviously.”

“*Solnishka*? ”

He cups his hands, pretending there’s concentrated sunlight in them. “Yes.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “I’ve never had a nickname before.”

He’s had too many names, but never one that felt so closely related to his own. Never one he might be able to keep.

Then she reaches out to him, touching his arm.

It's covered by the rough fabric of his shirt, but even that little moment of contact is enough to make him gasp.

“You’re it.”

“What?”

She jumps up, running away with a squeal. His eyes go wide, trying to figure out what he’s done wrong. How exactly he’s managed to scare her off without any effort. She wouldn’t have felt the amplifier’s ability through his clothing, and yet she’s running.

She stops a few feet away, turning back to look at him.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Coming where?”

“To play. You’re it.”

“What’s it?”

“You… I tagged you, so now you have to chase me until you can tag me back. Then I chase you. It’s a game.”

“Oh.” He thinks he’s seen children playing this game before in wide open fields or in the twisted streets behind shops, but he’s never been allowed to join. “Okay. I’m it.”

He stands up, running after her.

He likes being it. He likes chasing. He likes tagging, and he likes being chased in return. Even that fleeting moment of touch feels like a special kind of secret.

They run back and forth, tagging each other a dozen times before they fall over into twin heaps on the ground, exhausted even in this liminal space.

“I like it here.” He says it to the sky, not wanting to look at her. Something about admitting it makes him feel small, like she could give him one shove and break him into a million pieces. He isn’t sure he enjoys that feeling, but it’s not enough to stop him from liking it here. Not enough to stop him from liking *her*.

“I like it here too.”

“Will you come back?”

“I’m always here. You’re the one who has to come back.”

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He dreams of her the next night, and the next, and the next.

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But not every night. Some mornings, he wakes up with a rock in his chest, knowing that he's missed her again.

In his bleakest periods, it takes weeks before he makes his way back to her.

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"I want to play with the children," he says one day, staring out of the little gap between the window and the shoddy, moth-eaten curtain that covers it. There are seven kids running around outside, and he wants to join them. They are tagging, and he misses that game.

He hasn't seen *solnishka* in a long time.

"You can't. You know why. It's not safe, and if you don't care about protecting yourself, at least pretend to care about me."

His *madraya*'s words are often harsh, but he is used to it. The alternative is seeing her tied to a stake.

"But what if—" He stops, trying to think of how to explain it. "There's a girl."

"Not for you, *moi schast'ye*. You know you can't let the other children touch you."

He doesn't know how to make her understand that there really is a girl, someone who he meets only in his sleep, that touches him without fear or envy. If his *solnishka* knows he's an amplifier, then she doesn't seem to want to kill him for his power.

"Stay away from the others," she repeats. "One day, they'll all be gone. Better not to get attached."

He tries to picture his *solnishka* like he had once pictured the laundress's daughter (or was she a housekeeper's daughter?). He imagines her brown hair gone, her smile lost to time.

He finds that he can't. All skeletons look the same, he knows. It shouldn't be difficult to picture her dead and gone, remaining only in a small part of his past as he walks deeper into a wasteland of time.

But there is something radiant, something otherworldly about his *solnishka*. He wants to imagine her always like this — covered in sunlight and joy.

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The next time he sees her, she's lying with her face in the grass, the sun bright above them.

“What are you doing?”

“I don't want the sun today.”

“Then send it away?”

“I can't.”

“But it's your dream.” He's increasingly certain of this. He doesn't dream of clouds floating across the sky and birds chirping in the trees. His dreams are always dark, always touched by something that feels cursed. He couldn't bring her to this place even if he wanted to.

This is her land, the place where she gives him a kind of golden hope. It is only at her invitation that he is welcomed into the sun.

“I can't make it go anywhere. It's just here,” she says in frustration.

“Why do you want it to be dark?”

“Sometimes I like the dark. It's easier to hide then.”

His nose scrunches up. “What are you hiding from?”

“Everything. Anything. I don't want anyone to find me.”

“Even me?”

“Not you. Only you're allowed to be here.”

He looks around the meadow. “Only I *can* be here.”

“Maybe. We don't know.”

“But you... want the dark?”

“Yes,” she says again, voice filled with the same petulance that he recognizes from arguments with his mother.

“I'm—” He hesitates, but only briefly. Just because Aleksander can't do this for others doesn't mean Sasha can't. “Okay.”

Then he opens his palms, extending his fingers until ribbons of shadow crawl out from the tips.

She stares wide-eyed, entranced by the way the darkness seems to spill out of him like water he'd cupped in his palms.

“How are you doing that?”

“How do you call to the light?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not sure. I’ve never really thought about it before. It just comes when I need it.”

“You aren’t trained?”

“Who would train me? Who would understand what this is?”

*I would*, he thinks, but he doesn’t know how to train someone else. He understands it though. He understands what it is to have power sitting just beneath the surface that waits impatiently to be released into the world. He knows what it is to have to hide that same power.

“My *madraya* teaches me. Don’t your parents help you?”

He isn’t the only shadow summoner in the world, and for that he’s grateful. However special or terrifying he might be with these abilities, he isn’t alone. He wonders if her *madraya* can hold the sun too.

“I don’t have any.”

“What, parents?”

“Yes.”

The shadows stop unravelling from his hands. “Then who takes care of you?”

“The orphanage.”

“An orphanage. Like... a house for orphans?”

“Obviously.”

He thinks of his father, an ordinary heartrender who will one day be the same dust that everyone else is fated for. Perhaps he is already, killed by those who fear their kind. Aleksander could live hundreds of lifetimes beyond that of his father’s.

“You stay in one place?”

“Where else would I go?”

“Anywhere,” he says, voice almost stupified by the idea that she lives her whole life in the same building. Doesn’t she have to stay on the run to avoid getting caught with her powers?

Isn't she in danger? "Everywhere."

"No. Just here."

"And it's not an orphanage for... our kind?" He struggles to say the word *Grisha* even now, even in dreams. It's a dirty sort of word that is spoken only in whispers from those that he meets. He knows he's a Grisha, and yet he sometimes can't help feeling ashamed because of it.

He could play with other children if he wasn't this.

But it's always his mother's voice that reminds him to not hate his own power. He should be proud, even if sometimes it's hard to feel that way.

"No. Just for ordinary children."

"So there's nobody to teach you."

"I'm not sure they could if they tried."

"What do you mean?"

She sighs. "I remember the real world when I'm here. I remember what I ate for lunch today, and how I ran outside in the garden even though I wasn't supposed to, and how I hid from my lessons in one of the hall closets. And when I'm here, I remember you too. All our past meetings. But I don't remember them when I wake up. Tomorrow I won't remember your shadows. I won't remember the light, either."

"You don't remember me when you wake up?" A flash of disappointment hits him. He always remembers her, the girl who calls down the sun and lets it rest upon her palms. He couldn't forget her now if he tried, like she's engraved herself onto his person.

She shakes her head.

"But I remember you."

"Maybe you're stronger than me."

His head tips to the side, as though a different angle might explain her. "And you don't... you don't summon the sun when you're awake?"

"Never."

He understands better now exactly how she manages to stay hidden. If she never calls forth her powers, maybe doesn't even know she has them, then it would take an amplifier for anyone to find her. For as long as she can repress them, she could live an almost normal life.

He's been summoning darkness for as long as he can remember. Even before that, it haunted his dreams. Maybe this is her way of coping — the dreams that allow her the smallest hint of release.

“You’ll get sick,” is all he thinks to say.

She curls up on the ground, somehow still offended by the harsh light of her dream. He’d stopped creating the shadows she’d requested.

“Then I’ll get sick.”

There’s nothing she can do about it — not if she doesn’t remember these conversations when she wakes up. He could train her forever on how to harness her abilities, try to give her tips on summoning safely so she doesn’t get caught, but none of it will matter when the dreams disappear in the morning.

“You wanted it to be dark?” He asks instead, wondering if her earlier mood is somehow connected to all of this. If it’s harder to not know who she is, even if it means she can live like an *otkazat’sya*. It must drain her, make her feel weak and achy to never experience the potential of her abilities.

He can’t give her anything beyond a reprieve.

“Please.”

He turns the sky the darkest shade of black before laying down next to her. They don’t speak, the heaviness of their lives dragging them further into the abyss, but her hand reaches out to him, warm and alive.

## Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed baby Sasha learning about exposition. Comments are appreciated.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter Notes

This chapter includes a summary of the events in Demon in the Wood, which is a short story about young Aleksander and Baghra. If you don't want to be spoiled, you might want to read that before this. If you don't mind knowing, feel free to continue. It's the portion of the story where Annika and Lev are mentioned.

I didn't go hugely in depth with the actual events — it's mainly just about the repercussions and how they affect 13 year old Sasha.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Time goes on, and his list of names grows longer and longer.

He's Leonid and Mikhail and Viktor. He's fairly certain they've even reused a name once or twice, but it's impossible to remember.

In his mind, he's Aleksander, the name tattooed on his heart. Or at least sometimes he is. It's easy to forget, to fall into the trappings of each new identity.

At night, when he sees her, he's Sasha. Sashenka, if she's feeling playful.

He has many names, a child with no home or identity. The only things that remain are his face, his shadows, his madraya, and the girl in his dreams. They follow him from place to place, giving him these few stable things in an otherwise turbulent existence.

He tries to teach his *solnishka* to safely use her powers during their visits, but sometimes she looks so sickly that she doesn't have the energy. He wonders if she could dream herself a different way, if she could make herself healthy in their place between worlds.

One thing they're both sure of is that, the older she gets, the weaker it makes her to never summon. The dreams are a poor substitute, but he hopes it's enough to keep her alive.

Sometimes he can't help but imagine what she must look like when she sleeps; maybe, in the safety of her bed in the girl's dormitory at the orphanage, her eyes flash gold behind her closed eyelids each time she calls forth the light inside her. Or perhaps gold flickers at the tips of her fingers, glowing with the strength of her power.

If they do, no one notices. No one sees anything odd about this girl except for her frailty.

But there is only so much strength he can try to give her.

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She speaks of friends in passing. A few girls who are nice enough. A boy who sometimes follows her around.

Nothing that makes him think he isn't leagues above them in this world of their own. Those friends might share the daylight with her, but he shares something better, something far more intimate.

Still, sometimes it makes him jealous. Jealous for her attention.

And on his worse days, jealous of her ability to have friends in the first place.

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When he's thirteen, his mother gives him a new name. Arkady this time, though they're going into Fjerda, where he hardly speaks the language. After all his travels, the Shu Han and Kerch tongues come as easily as his native Ravkan, but Fjerdan still bests him. He sounds like an outsider, and so they have spun a story of a mother and her child seeking refuge from their home in the south.

*Arkady*, but the Grisha of this little settlement will call him *Eryk*. Easier for them to pronounce. He will become the person they want him to be in their heads.

If he can manage that, manage to fit in and not make himself conspicuous, then they will spend the whole winter in this town in order to learn new skills from the *Ulle*, a powerful squaller. It might be the longest he's ever had roots in a single place, and he longs for that kind of home.

Even if he still can't touch anyone.

He doesn't see the girl in his dreams for weeks leading up to the move, and the journey grows more and more difficult. When his mother leaves him in the wilderness, scouting ahead to make sure they will be welcomed in by this new group of Grisha, the witches of Fjerda, she takes their only lantern with her.

For two days, he doesn't sleep. Anytime he even remotely dozes, he hopes to see *solnishka*'s light to keep him safe, but it doesn't come. There is only the horrible darkness of the forest, and the terror never allows him to rest for long. He spends the nights huddled in on himself, praying for sunrise and cursing himself for being so afraid of the thing that he is meant to control.

He is too old to be afraid of the dark.

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His winter in the north lasts less than a full day.

Annika, the tidemaker girl, discovers his ability to amplify and tries to steal it for herself. She and Lev — the Ulle's son — fight for the honor of killing him and wearing his bones.

She'd invited him to play, and then she'd tried to murder him.

It's something he knows he should be used to. He's listened to his mother talk about the dangers around them enough, but just this once he wanted to believe he could let his guard down.

It's the first time he ever manages the Cut.

Annika and Lev are the first people who won't survive his darkness. Everyone is dust compared to him, one foot already in the grave, but these children are the first he ever sends there intentionally.

It makes him feel sick to know they won't be the last.

It also makes him feel powerful.

With fear and rage burning through his veins, he'd carved deep slashes into their chests. The Grisha villagers blame the *otkazat'sya* when they find him, bloodied and barely alive, injured by his own hand to make it look like an attack.

They can never know that their children were slain by his unnatural skill. Even they would fear this kind of witchcraft.

He and his mother leave that same day. This world is no place for him, and yet he knows that if he only tries hard enough, only fights for the Grisha, he can chisel out a place for himself. A place to be their homeland. He has all the time in the world to see it done.

"I cannot hate that boy and girl for what they tried to do," his mother says. She would kill to protect him, would sacrifice the whole world to let him be the last one standing, and yet she understands why Annika and Lev had attempted to kill him. "The way we live, the way we're forced to live—it makes us desperate."

One day, he promises, there will be no more desperation. He will lead the Grisha into a prosperous future somehow, and then no one will need to steal his bones. They will fear him, and they will follow him.

The oath brands itself on his heart just beneath his true name, and he knows he will carry it with him always.

Either he will fulfill his purpose or he will die in the attempt. He will remake this world for his people.

He will remake this world for *her*; for his *solnishka*, who has to fight against herself every day just to remain safe.

One day, he will give her the gift of safety like she gives him light. They will bask in a world that bows to them.

He doesn't meet her in her dreams that night, and for a moment it makes him so angry, so upset to have missed her again, that he *tugs* on the part of him that feels tied to her. He knows it's in his head, but he can't help but feel that a thread of twisted light and darkness spans the distance between them. Just like using the Cut had, pulling on it comes naturally, accidentally. He doesn't have to think about it, simply giving himself over to the overwhelming need he feels.

When she arrives, stumbling out of thin air like the winds had dragged her from safer shores, they are not in her bright meadow. He gawps for a moment, surprised that somehow it worked, that he'd dragged her from her own dream into his. The darkness of his forest surrounds them, a cold landscape only just visible in the moonlight.

Usually he joins her in her dreams. Tonight, she will reside once more in his nightmares.

She doesn't say anything. The look on his face, part devastation and part ambition, must be enough to tell her how he feels.

Even in the dream, a world of his own creation, a harsh wind blows through the branches.

She steps forward, taking his hand in hers. "What happened?"

He pulls her into his arms, needing the comfort of her touch if only this once. This is the luxury he can never possess in his waking hours, and he had been a fool to think that Annika could ever be to him what his *solnishka* is. Only one person can ever truly look at him without seeing either his wickedness or the utility of his death, and she resides in a place that no one else can destroy.

"I showed myself in front of the wrong people. I made a mistake."

She clutches him tighter to her own tiny body. She's practically a twig. He's met many children his own age and studied them carefully from a distance — they're almost always skinny, not having yet come into their own, but she is waiflike. A strong breeze might blow her over.

Still, her arms are vices around him, not letting him go. He finds himself liking it too much. To be held like this, like he *matters*, like someone would miss him should he disappear from the world, is intoxicating.

"Are you okay?"

He lets his hand cup the back of her neck as his face buries itself in her shoulder. The touch of skin on skin sends a comforting lull through both of them, gentle and serene.

It should make him sick to feel the power of his amplifier so soon after he'd nearly died because of it, but it doesn't. He would trust *solnishka* with every part of him.

"I'm going to make the world safe for us one day," he promises instead of answering. He's not sure that he ever truly had a childhood, but whatever semblance of it he might've clung to, it's gone now. Now there is only the desperation and drive of a man who is too young to have seen so much. But he will do anything to protect them. To protect her. "And you won't have to hide."

"That would be nice." Her voice is only a whisper, carried through the forest like a lullaby. It's wistful and tired. Maybe she doesn't believe him. Maybe she doesn't want to let herself hope. But he will — he's sworn an oath to himself.

Into the worn fabric of her jacket, undoubtedly passed from child to child at the orphanage until it's threadbare, he promises himself to her. *"Jer molle pe oonet. Enel mörđ je nej afva trohem verret."* He might not speak Fjerdan well, but he knows these words intimately. They linger in his heart, heavy and dark. He wants to give them new meaning.

"What does it mean?"

"They're the words of the *Drüskelle*."

"The witch hunters? The ones who are trying to kill you?"

"Everyone's trying to kill us all the time. The *Drüskelle* aren't special, just better at their task."

"Okay. So what does it mean?"

"It's the oath they swear to Fjerda. It's the same oath I'll swear to the Grisha they have promised to destroy." *It's the oath I swear to you, if you'll let me. Sworn on the stars, on the sun itself.* He turns his face, letting the breath of his words graze across her neck. "I have been made to protect you. Only in death will I be kept from this oath."

Her fingers tighten at the back of his shirt.

"What will you do? To protect them?"

His eyes close as he drinks in her presence. He isn't sure he could do this without her. There is already so much within him that is broken, and yet it would be irrevocably worse without her here to bind him together into something that still feels like a person.

"Whatever it takes."

She doesn't say anything, but the silence speaks for her. She has always radiated a kind of light that the world isn't deserving of. Certainly he isn't deserving of it.

There is little in her that would ever condone violence, and yet what other option does he have? He can't protect them without it. He was given these gifts for a reason; he was born with gifts rivaled only by her own for a *reason*, and they can't allow themselves to live in fear forever.

The *otkazat'sya*, the Grisha, the Fjerdans, the Shu — they would all die one day. More will follow, babies replacing their grandparents in an indefinite cycle, and yet they each have a limited lifespan.

He doesn't. Not if he is careful.

No, he has time on his side and an oath to fulfill.

She might not like it, but it is what he knows has to be done for her. Not today. Not even soon. There is too much to learn in the meantime, too much he doesn't know.

But one day. One day he will give them the lives they deserve — free from the things that haunt them.

Finally, she allows tendrils of light to spin a web around them, a shimmering secret that they share with only each other. The grotesque landscape of his dream seems to melt away, obscured by her power.

They duck close together, kneeling on the ground with the tethers wrapping around them like warm blankets. To be hidden away here with her, lost in the bright wash of gold, makes him feel more at home than he ever has before. There is only one place in the world where he belongs: beside her, no matter where she is. The day and the night, the light and the darkness. They exist to compliment each other, to share their burdens and to bring each other peace. He wishes only to remain with her, safe and warm and cared for.

It's a dream worth fighting for. Killing for even, whether she likes that or not.

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He keeps training her as the years go by, seeing her only a few times a month. She stays so small as he continues to grow, and soon it seems that he's towering over her.

She learns how to project her light further, how to turn it into a weapon. He teaches her to manipulate the Cut. The older he grows — seventeen, eighteen, nineteen — the less afraid he is to use it.

*It's a tool*, he reminds himself. The *otkazat'sya* have their swords and the Grisha have their skills. He could no sooner rid himself of the ability to use the Cut than an inferni could stop calling forth fire. It's a part of him, embedded deep in his bones.

Some nights, he sees *solnishka* in his dreams, but it's different. A little bit wrong. The scenes look more flat, not quite real. When he's with her, there is hardly a difference between their imaginings and the waking world — every drop of dew and blade of grass seems to be accounted for.

In these dreams though, there is only the illusion of a real world. And while she is there, her smile is dimmer, her laugh less musical.

She's there, but she's not.

It takes him many such evenings to realize they're normal dreams. She isn't sharing that space with him, and his brain has decided to imagine her in her absence. The entire thing, from her clothing to her words, is a product of his own subconscious.

It makes the ache for her worse. Even when he tries to pull her into his dreams for real, to tug on their connection and bring her to him once more, it rarely works. Only in moments of truly heightened emotion does he manage it successfully.

*I'll be reckless then, he thinks. I'll bring her into my dreams every night by force of will.*

But even with the life he leads, always on the run, there can't be trouble every day. And more often than not, he can't bring her back into his dreams.

So he settles for seeing her once or twice a month.

And the greedy part of him even begins to enjoy the dreams she isn't really there for. Any chance to see her, even if she's only a figment of his imagination, is a reminder that she exists. That somewhere in the world, she is out there.

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“What is this place?”

He turns in a circle, staring at the landscape. Usually she imagines them in simple surroundings — a meadow, a forest, a valley. Always beneath the sun, sometimes poised at high noon and others only just beginning to rise.

This dream is different.

First, there's an endless expanse of what looks like water, only it's more purple than blue. When he steps towards it, bending to let some trickle across his fingers, he finds that it retains its color instead of going clear in his palm.

There are waves out in the distance, and he watches them as they seem to roll over each other, but at no point do they crest onto the shore. Where the water meets land is strangely

still and unburdened. He's never seen the ocean behave in this manner before, and he's visited more than a few beaches.

The sand is almost right — dark, the way some beaches in Shu Han look — but it's closer to the consistency of dirt. If this wasn't a dream, he's sure that the combination of purple water and dirt on the shore would turn the whole stretch of land into an ugly mudpit, but within this space between worlds, it exists exactly as she wants it to.

"I'm not sure. I wasn't trying to bring us here."

He steps back from the water. Even in dreams, wet clothing can be mildly irritating. When he reaches drier terrain, he allows himself to sit. She drops down next to him.

He looks over at her, unsurprised to see her in her white nightgown. Most evenings she appears in some form of sleepwear. They're usually practical — warm and made for comfort — but there's something about them that makes it hard not to take notice.

It's probably a good thing only he'd gone close to the water.

"What is it supposed to be?" He teases.

Her hand smacks against his shoulder, and he has to cover his laugh with a fake sounding cough. She only glares.

"It's the ocean obviously."

"It's beautiful," he says with a smile. She assumes he's still making fun of her, but there's a hidden part of him that is entirely serious. If his *solnishka* wants to remake the world in the ways she pictures it in her head, he would be all too happy to help her — purple seas and all.

"I've never seen it before. I've never been anywhere beyond the closest town."

"I'll take you one day."

She looks up at him. There's something frighteningly open about how she appears sometimes, and it makes him want more. He wants to know her every thought, to be privy to each secret. He knows more about her than anyone else in her life — more than even she knows, in some cases — but it's not enough. There will never be enough of this girl for him. He wants to pick her apart and understand what makes her tick.

What about her makes *him* tick, maybe.

"You will?"

"Yes. When I whisk you away from the orphanage and teach you how to summon outside of these forgotten dreams. We'll travel all over the world."

Without waiting for a response, he throws up a seashell — a little lopsided and like shells he's never seen before, but not totally off the mark — and then flicks his hand, sending the

Cut through it midair. It lands on the ground, split into two equal pieces. He throws up another and gestures for her to try.

She tries a few times, though hers all come down either not fully severed or with only the tip missing, but it's better than her aim had been before. He encourages her on, gathering more shells around him to toss.

"I'm not sure I'd like to travel so much. To be on the run all the time, afraid of getting caught."

"It's difficult," he admits. "But I'd like it more if you were with me."

A coy smile lights up her face. "Need me to protect you?"

He drops the shell he'd been holding, and it lands in the dirt. Eyes trained on her, he can't help but raise a hand to her cheek, letting the backs of his fingers brush against her skin. The graze is so gentle, barely making contact, but he can still see the way her pupils dilate.

"It couldn't hurt." He wants to protect her, but he's sure in time and with the right training it would go both ways. They would be far better together than apart. There is so much potential between the two of them, if only he can figure out how to use it. "We're going to change the world, you and me."

"That's ambitious," she rasps out.

"I'm ambitious. Why — don't you think we can do it?"

"Change the world?"

"Yes."

"That might keep us busy."

"I don't mind being busy."

"It sounds like something that's bigger than just two people."

He raises an eyebrow. "Someone has to lead the charge. We'll have all the time in the world."

"What do you mean?"

He moves his hand down to her shoulder, realizing that he's never explained this part to her before.

"Never mind."

"No, what do you mean?"

"I can't be certain," he hedges, though if he's wrong about this, he thinks something in him would come unmoored.

“But you suspect...?”

“Grisha, if they escape detection long enough, can grow quite old.”

“How old?”

“I’ve seen several make it to one hundred without issue.”

“Normal people do that too.”

“You’re right, and I can’t be sure because of how often Grisha are killed young, but I think there’s a correlation. Using our abilities makes us healthier — it’s the same reason why repressing yours when you’re awake hurts you so much.”

Her shoulders hunch inwards at the reminder. “So you think Grisha who can use their powers freely and don’t get killed for it live longer?”

“Yes.”

“But not so much longer than everyone else.”

“For normal Grisha, no.”

“What does that mean?”

“My mother’s been alive for hundreds of years.”

“Hundreds?” She asks, sounding both skeptical and worried. “How?”

“Whatever makes her different — whatever decided to give her greater power than the others — also keeps her healthier.”

“Are you... hundreds of years old?” The question is quiet, like she hadn’t even considered this before.

“We grew up together,” he reminds her. “You’ve known me since I was a boy.”

She nods before trying to deflect with humor. “So you’re a baby immortal.”

“So are you. The shadows, the sun. I have to believe it’s connected. There are no others like us.”

Her hands curl into fists where they rest in her lap. He lets his fingers touch the bare skin of her neck, if only to allow that flow of reassuring energy to move between them.

“What if I don’t want to be immortal?” The words are strangled, a little bit broken. The harsh reality of eternity is a fear she wasn’t even aware she would have to face.

“I’m not sure it’s a choice.”

She drops her forehead to his shoulder. There is something so resigned about her in this moment, and it makes him wish that he had a different answer for her. He has accepted his own fate, and it's become all the easier since realizing that one day he might share it with her and not be so alone, but with the purple waves crashing into each other far from the shore, he regrets that this is the world he has to bring her into alongside him.

There is little comfort in death, but the lack of it, the inability to reach it at all, is potentially worse.

If she's resolute enough, she might be able to prevent it. Repressing such a depth of power is eating her from the inside out, and it's not impossible that one day it could kill her. It has been trying hard enough over the last decade.

If she chose that path, he's not certain what he'd do. He doesn't think he's strong enough to let her go; he would walk to the ends of the earth to pull her back from oblivion if that's what was required to keep her.

She might not thank him for it though.

The thoughts spin circles in his head, filling him with his own dread. He has a talent for turning her dreams into nightmares without any effort at all.

Instead of denying him, she only says, "But you'll be there."

"Yes. You won't be alone."

Not like he's always feared he might one day be. There can be no true partnerships with anyone else — not when others' lives are so fleeting.

"Okay," she murmurs.

That's all she says, keeping her body curled into his.

That word is enough of a promise for today.

## Chapter End Notes

Comments are always appreciated! Thanks for reading.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

I made up some Ravkan words in this chapter. If they're noticeably bad, I very much encourage you to let your eyes glaze over whenever you see them.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Will you tell me again about Ilya?”

The question is innocently delivered between bites of his apple. Though his mother gives him a curious look, she doesn't seem surprised.

He's always been Ilya to Aleksander. Not his *dushkya*, his grandfather. Not *Sankt Ilya in Chains*. Just Ilya, a man who seemed mad to the people of his town. A man who perhaps was a little mad, at least towards the end.

It's a madness that Aleksander can almost understand. The feeling of it, the dread and the hope and the *possibility* of Grisha powers, bubbles beneath his skin, waiting to escape. Ilya must have felt the same all those years ago, theorizing over what it means to have these abilities. What exactly it is that Grisha can do in the world.

If Ilya had been crazy to devote his life towards his studies, towards the pursuit of power, then perhaps one day they will speak of Aleksander with the same careful reverence. The same people who kill him may one day venerate him. He'll be *Sankt Aleksandr of the Darkness* or *the Starless Saint* or some nonsense. They might not even remember his true name — not after how many changes he's gone through. He could end up being *Sankt Karp of Nowhere* in the *Istorii Sankt'ya*.

He shudders at the thought. No, if he's going to be remembered, it will be for more than his death. More than one act of *merzost* to save a dead child. He will make himself unforgettable when he gives the Grisha the agency they've so long been denied in the world.

“Why do you want to hear about him again?”

He shrugs. “Just curious.” There really is nothing better to do today anyway. They will be on the run before long, and there's no use in settling into this new home they've carved out for themselves. It's easier to dream and plot than it is to consider the reality around him anymore.

His mother purses her lips before nodding, telling him the stories he's already heard many times. She doesn't sound embarrassed of her own actions in the story, and he can't decide if time has healed the wound or if there was never one to begin with.

“Where are his journals?” He asks when the story has finished.

“I’ve hidden them for safe keeping.”

He watches her face for any ticks, but she gives away nothing. The older he grows, the more he realizes he may never understand his mother.

She may never understand him either.

“Will you take me to them?”

“Why?”

Everything is a test with her. Everything is a challenge.

“There’s still more I need to learn.”

Along their travels, they’d tried to pick up knowledge from the other Grisha they came across. It was difficult given how much of themselves they had to hide, but they gained much from the effort.

Still, almost nothing could compare with the knowledge that he imagines must live in those journals.

Her eyes narrow, sizing him up. She loves him, but sometimes he thinks she doesn’t trust him very much. For all of his life, she’s had to worry that he would get them caught. It would’ve been so easy to see them both on the pyre, and then they would be like all the others: only dust.

But he’s not a child anymore, at least not relative to mortal lifespans. He could be married off by now if their lives were ordinary.

“There’s more I can master,” he reiterates. “And more I can give to the world once I have.”

She places her hand on his cheek, the touch gentle. He can’t remember the last time someone touched him outside his dreams. It makes his skin prickle in an almost uncomfortable way, and yet part of him yearns to lean into it.

“You will bow to no man. Not to the *tsar*. Not to the memory of *Sankt Ilya*.” The name comes out with some disdain. She hates the way people twisted what they had done to her father into a martyrdom. “No one is your equal save me. There is no one like us.” She runs her hand down his face, stroking it softly. When she speaks again though, the words are harsh. “But don’t be stupid, *moi schast’ye*.”

It’s a reminder. A warning.

They might be better than the others. He has to believe they are, otherwise their gifts are meaningless. But that doesn’t make them infallible. That knowledge has followed him from the cradle, always a single step behind him. The truth that lurks in his shadow.

“I won’t be.”

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Her words stick with him.

*No one is your equal save me. There is no one like us.*

He closes his eyes and pictures dark hair. Bruises beneath tired eyes. Hands cupped around energy that spills out in the gaps between fingers.

She is like them.

Or she would be, if only she could summon outside of her dreams. If only they didn't have to hide.

It's the one thing his mother can't yet understand. He isn't just doing this for the two of them. He's doing it for *solnishka*, and for all of them. Every Grisha who fears the *Drückelle*. Every Grisha who can't own land because of persecution. Every Grisha who has been experimented on or sold into slavery.

His people need help, and that alone would be enough. He would've never had to kill Annika and Lev if the world wasn't so set against their kind.

More than anything, though, it's the knowledge that he doesn't need to be alone that drives him. Wherever she is in the world, she exists. This other part of him, the light in which he casts shadows. There is an eternity waiting for them if they can only turn it into something worth sharing.

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“I’m tired.”

The sun shines brightly over them that night. It’s the first time he’s seen her in over a month, and he’d been growing antsy in her absence.

She flops down to the ground after their cursory training session, making it clear that she’s done. He sits beside her, twisting his body until he can rest his head in her lap, looking up at her. Her hand moves towards his hair, messing with the inky strands in a way that feels wonderfully unfamiliar.

“You’re resting right now,” he reminds her.

“I know.”

He reaches up, trying not to startle her as his fingers seek out the bruises under her eyes. “It’s not enough.”

“The training?” She asks. “You’re doing the best you can under the circumstances, Sashenka. You can’t fix me.”

He shakes his head in frustration. Every time he sees her, she looks more and more diminished. Where he has grown tall and strong, bolstered by his advancing abilities until he almost glows with health, she looks half dead. Her hair is always brittle, and her smile is always wan. She gives it in good faith, but he can see the exhaustion behind it. Even she, the living sun, cannot hide the strain her body is under behind false pretenses of happiness.

“It’s not just that. None of this is enough. You’re wasting away.”

“Then the orphanage will have one fewer mouth to feed.”

He glares at her, but she only smirks. It’s frustrating to him how easily she turns her own pain into glib remarks, but that’s just another reason why he can’t trust her to take care of herself alone anymore.

It’s something else about the comment that sits uncomfortably in his mind though. He can’t pinpoint what it is, but he knows something isn’t adding up.

Instead of pursuing the thought, he asks, “Then tell me where you are, and I’ll come find you. I’ll steal you away and remind you of what you are when you’re awake. You can stop pretending to be *otkazat’sya* and making yourself sick.”

She lets out a laugh, and for a moment the sheer brightness of the sound makes him forget everything else that’s wrong around them. If she can laugh like that, then she can’t possibly be destroying herself from the inside out. It’ll all be okay if only he can follow that sound to its origin.

“You’re forgetting we tried that already.”

“We did?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember? Once we realized we could exchange names, we tested what else was forbidden.”

In his head, he curses whatever it is about their connection that seems keen on keeping them apart. Why allow them to see each other, to find each other from the earliest days of their youths, only to censor their words? What was the point of it all?

“I know that, but we never tried much harder. There’s always a workaround, like for the names. *Sashenka* and *Solnishka*. So we can make it work for this, too. Describe the town nearest to your orphanage. I’ve been all over Ravka, so maybe I’m familiar with it. And if I’m not, someone else must know it. I could ask around. Discreetly, of course.”

He really doesn’t need anyone piecing together that he’s searching for one of the most powerful Grisha to walk the earth.

She gives him a wary glance, but her hand never stops scratching at his scalp.

“Fine. But I’m not sure I’ll do a very good job of it. The girls aren’t often allowed on the trips into town.” She says it with a hint of bitterness.

For the next twenty minutes, she struggles to explain what the place looks like. Most things are the same there as anywhere else, which makes it almost impossible to distinguish. A few inns, a general store for trading and purchases, a smithy and a tannery. There’s a market with stalls, but it’s not a very big one.

“Oh!” She gasps. “And there’s a church. People say it’s small but I’ve never seen a bigger one to compare it to. It has two towers at the front, but one has an onion dome on top and the other has a rounded dome. No one knows why, and it looks a little bit ridiculous. We couldn’t decide if it was a mistake or not when we saw it.”

He furrows his brow, her words triggering a faint memory.

He’d been... *Nikita* that time? Just a boy passing through — only perhaps fourteen years old. Had they really once been so close to each other?

It seems like he should’ve known then. He should’ve felt her proximity, should’ve seen the glow of her light at his own fingertips, calling him to her. It’s cruel to think that the world had let him pass her by.

“It’s...” he frowns, trying to remember the name of the town. “Yes! It’s—”

The name stutters in his mouth, refusing to form. He lets out a groan instead, sitting up in frustration.

“Here, give me—” He takes her hand in his, impatience written in his every motion.

“What?”

He starts tracing letters into her palm, but she curls her fingers up.

“Start again. I wasn’t paying attention.”

He goes slowly. He can read and write well enough, but it’s never been a priority in his life. He and his mother spend too much of their time just trying to get by, and that leaves little time for exploring libraries and learning the fine art of penmanship. His mother has always reminded him that he has centuries to master the skill, and so his abilities are only basic. *Solnishka* is much better at it than he is.

He traces the letters into her skin, watching her eyes try to follow the motion.

“Yes! That’s it!”

He’s only halfway through the word, but she must recognize it well enough. The smile on her face this time is radiant. Her exhaustion seems to melt away beneath the splendor of being *seen*, being *recognized* by him.

He can find her. This information is enough to go to her immediately, to pull her away from that orphanage and make her understand who she is outside of her forgotten dreams.

He smiles in return, face split open by it. He can't ever remember feeling this way — feeling this kind of hope.

Without thought, he pulls her into him, hugging her tightly. It's a relief to know that this can finally become something else. He can stop searching for her face every night in dreams. She can finally remember him in the light of day.

"I'm so glad you remembered those stupid domes," he whispers.

"They're just so ugly," she says with a laugh. "And anyways, you're the one who did all the work. You had to remember that place from half a lifetime ago."

"I'm so glad they're as hideous as they are, because otherwise I never would've known. They were the gaudiest gold, too. I can't believe no one thought to make them match. At least it made them memorable."

"Gaudy?"

He misses the frown that colors her tone, too busy clutching her against him and thinking of the future.

"Yes. The brightest gold paint imaginable. They'd give your sunlight a run for its money."

"I... No."

"No?" He pulls back to look at her face. It's pinched in confusion. "No what?"

"It's... the domes aren't gaudy."

Now he frowns too. He's never lived in one place long enough to feel any kind of pride in it, but maybe...? "I wasn't trying to insult them."

"No, I mean... The church is old. Practically dilapidated. The gold on the domes has all but flaked away by now."

"But it was only about six years ago that I saw it," he says stupidly. "And the church looked practically brand new."

"I've been going into that town since I was a child. Not often, but often enough to know that those domes have never looked new."

"Never?" The word sinks in his stomach.

"Not in my lifetime."

He takes her hand again, spelling the town's name out in full this time. Her gaze is just as steady as before, taking in each letter and committing it to memory.

“Yes,” she says when he’s finished. “That’s the right place.”

“But how—?”

So many times he’s wondered what causes these dreams. If it’s because they’re two of a kind, darkness and light. If it’s because they’re destined to meet.

Or if it’s because of some kind of *merzost*. That had been one of his earliest theories, he remembers.

Finally, an explanation comes to him that makes his heart clench. He can’t prove it, but somehow he knows that it must be true.

“I’m going to live forever,” he whispers. The sound is too broken for the springtime dream she has them in.

“Congratulations?”

“No, I—I just realized. I’m going to live forever. At least I should. And you will too, if you ever start using your powers.”

“I know. We’ve talked about this before.”

“Yes, but… If I’m going to live indefinitely, we don’t have to be alive at the same time to share these dreams.” He shakes his head in an effort to quiet his thoughts. “It’s the same town, but I can’t find you, because you aren’t there. You haven’t been born yet.”

“That’s why the church looked new to you,” she realizes.

“It’s still new. Which means it could be… decades, *centuries* before we’re in the same time.”

“So you can’t find me, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be found. Maybe you’re on your way here already and you don’t even know it because it hasn’t happened for you yet.”

He thinks of Ilya and his journals. He’s the only person Aleksander knows about who spent any time trying to learn about *merzost*. Now more than ever, he longs to have those journals in his possession.

Tomorrow, when he wakes up to a new world in which he’s certain that his *solnishka* doesn’t yet exist, he’ll renew his efforts to have his mother lead him to them. He needs to know what Ilya discovered.

“I hope so,” he says. He has to believe that he is on his way to her right now in that future world. He *will* find her; of that he’s certain. He will tear apart the world if that’s what it takes.

She lays back on the grass, pulling him down beside her. With his hand cradled in her own, she etches letters into his palm.

A - L - I - N - O - C - H - K - A

*Alinonchka.* Alinochka and Sashenka.

A diminutive of her name, gifted to him the same way he gave her his so many years before.

Alina and Aleksander.

He holds her hand tightly in his for the rest of the night, not wanting to face the day.

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When he wakes, he feels, for a moment, the gaping hole of time that stretches before him. It's something he tries not to think about often, knowing that it is the thing that separates him from everyone else.

His mother may say they're better, and perhaps they are — but they'll never be normal either. They'll never fit in.

His *solnishka* had been his only hope at finding someone he could grow with. Someone who started with him as a child and could follow him into the long eternity.

But now he knows otherwise. Maybe he will have that, if he is able to hold out long enough for her to finally join him here.

Or maybe he will die before that can happen. Maybe that's why he hasn't found her in her time, because he's only an echo by then, the distant memory of what could have been.

He's never prayed before. Never felt he had a reason to. But before he climbs out of bed to get on with the order of the day, he closes his eyes and wishes, to any stars who might hear and any saints who feel benevolent, that he will find her.

It might be her only hope.

It might be *his* only hope.

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For the next two weeks, he thinks of nothing else but this revelation. He picks at it from every angle, trying to understand exactly what it tells him.

First, and perhaps most obviously, it means that there is nothing he can do in his present form to help *solnishka*. Alina.

He can't go to her. Even with the use of *merzost*, he isn't sure bending and travelling through time would be possible or helpful. He might only make everything so much worse, so for now all he can do is keep trekking endlessly forward, hoping to live long enough to meet her.

The second issue, which is even more distressing, is the realization that nothing changes.

Nothing, in the time between his world and Alina's, has made it so she is safe to be herself. She has been hiding away a part of herself so completely that she can only access it through dreams. Surely then that means that the plight of the Grisha hasn't changed in the years that rest between them.

For all his grand oaths, it seems he accomplishes nothing at all. Nothing that will carve them out a homeland, a place of safety.

"I need those journals." His voice is resolute, leaving no room for argument.

His mother looks him over, but he remains perfectly still. When she meets his eyes, he holds his ground. There have been many years where he did whatever she said, fearing what would happen if he erred in even the smallest way. Annika had been proof enough of that.

He isn't afraid anymore. The only thing that truly frightens him is the idea that nothing may ever change. If he dies pursuing this cause, at least he knows he tried.

His mother taught him a valuable lesson growing up: she would've sacrificed whatever necessary to protect him. She would allow whole towns to die if it saved her son.

Whatever is necessary to free the Grisha, he will do it.

Finally, his mother nods. She says nothing else, but her reminder sits in the back of his head. *Don't be stupid.*

He isn't sure he can promise to her that he won't be, and the idea doesn't bother him anymore. Whatever it takes.

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It takes three weeks of travel before they get to where the journals have been stored. For the innumerable times that his mother has crisscrossed Ravka in her long life, she has always kept them in the same place. They're too valuable to lose when on the run, and too dangerous to have in their possession if captured by the authorities.

He can't imagine what the Shu Han or the Fjerdans would do if they understood just how powerful Grisha can become if they're only willing to dabble in something abominable.

He's more than willing now.

“Here,” his mother says one evening, kicking at the trunk of a tree. He moves to set up camp, but she swats at his shoulder with a huff. “Not to sleep, boy. I meant *here*. This is where they are.”

He looks around, taking a survey of the area. She had taught him long ago to read the world and notice everything that might be of use to him. The dynamics between people, the lies they tell, the way one forest slightly differentiates from another and what it might mean about the people who pass through it. He is attuned to the finest details, but he can’t see anything special about this spot.

“Why here?”

“As good a spot as any,” she says haughtily.

He tries to see what she means, to see what she must see about this place when she looks at it, but there’s nothing. It’s close enough to the village she was born in, but the forest appears otherwise ordinary.

She kicks at the tree again. “You’ll need to start digging. They’re buried at the base of the tree.”

He does so without complaint, though his mind never stops turning the whole time. Hope fills his chest, and the knowledge of it makes him uncomfortable. He doesn’t want to have so much riding on these books, and yet there is. Without them, without their guidance and help, he isn’t sure what he alone can do for Ravka. If they’re not useful — just the ramblings of a man half insane — then he will have to start from scratch.

He digs faster, knowing it would be so much easier if he had proper tools, but he is determined. They haven’t come all this way for nothing.

A few feet down, he hits metal.

“Grisha steel?”

“How else do you think they were preserved? You think I pay a librarian to tend to them?”

His eyes roll without prompting. “I didn’t realize you had a hidden drop point.”

“Ilya had several. He was always working on things that he was worried might be discovered by the wrong people, so he fashioned these as a way of keeping nosy *otkazat’sya* at bay.”

He brushes the loose dirt off the top.

“You have the key?” He asks, looking at the ominously large lock.

She pulls it out of a pocket in her skirt and hands it over to him. He wonders where she’s kept it all this time. Certainly he’d never noticed her carrying it around or moving it with their few belongings before.

Even after all these years, the lock doesn't stick — perfectly crafted by the world's most powerful fabrikator. It makes a loud clicking sound as the key fits itself into place.

When he opens the chest and sees what's inside, his eyes go wide. Dozens of journals rest in the safety of the box. Some are old and weathered, clearly well-used by their owner. The others, those that sit on the top, are almost pristine. Perhaps they contain the last of his thoughts before the end of his life.

He pulls one out, hand steady for all that he feels it should be trembling.

Turning back the cover, he reads *Property of I.M.* written in a neat, careful script.

He bites down hard on his lip, filled again with that feeling of painful hope.

“I’m going to need time to read through all of these.”

His mother sighs, an annoyed, put-upon sound. “Then we’ll have to spend some time at the caves.”

The caves are one of her least favorite places, being remote and difficult to access, but it also means that no one stumbles upon them there. Yovlinsky, the nearest semblance of a town, is a two day journey, and a person would have to be searching intently to find the cave system. They have served in the past as a place to regroup when they weren’t quite sure which direction to head next. They’ve never stayed there long — it’s difficult to hunt there for an extended period of time — but he thinks he won’t be going anywhere for a while. There are hundreds, thousands of pages to work through before he can even think of parting from these books again.

He removes each carefully from their resting place and puts them in his bag before relocking the box and standing again. It takes him a few moments to rebury it and hide the disturbed dirt from prying eyes. When he finally finishes, he gestures on, saying only, “Lead the way.”

## Chapter End Notes

The possibility of them not living in the same time was something a lot of you asked about, so I'm glad we've finally made it to that revelation! That is going to continue to be a big plot point from here on out!

Comments are very appreciated!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Back again for another chapter. I've been really enjoying reading all your theories about where the story is heading — and a few times I've thought about writing alternate endings just because you've had such cool ideas! So thanks for joining me for this weird dreamsharing fic, and I hope you like this update. The darker stuff is coming, but they're still being (mostly) stubbornly sweet for now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He spends a month in the caves barely moving, devouring Ilya's words.

His mother does the hunting, which she complains about often. He reminds her that, even with the lack of game in the area, she can kill without effort. It doesn't qualify as a hardship on her part, all things considered. In fact, when she returns from her sojourns, she looks healthy and glowing. Concealing their abilities and reducing themselves to their simplest parts is tiring. Even among the small communities of other Grisha, they are never safe to simply *be* like they are here, away from the eyes of the small-minded.

The oldest books, those owned by Ilya in the beginnings of his studies, are filled with interesting theories on how Grisha abilities came to be. He learns about *odinakovost* and *etovost*, the 'thisness' and 'thatness' that makes things both distinct in the world and able to be manipulated by those with the talent to do so. These ideas aren't new to him — they've been presented to him time and again over the years through the teachings of his mother and the various elders they've met along the way. But Ilya's thoughts on the subject dive deeper into the why of it all.

He spends many weeks trying to apply Ilya's thinking towards his own abilities. It's not always simple; after all, he had been a fabrikator by birth, though he dabbled in many of the skills used by a corporalnik. Channeling Ilya's logic into something that makes sense for an etherealnik is an entirely different kind of thinking, but he works at it, trying to see the ways that they might intersect.

The first time he cloaks his hand in shadows in a manner that makes it disappear entirely from sight, he realizes that there's hope yet for utilizing this part of Ilya's notes.

It takes two months before he can do it over his full body, and it works best in the low light of evening, but it's not entirely impossible in the daytime. He bends the light and darkness around himself in order to be shielded from view.

It works with objects and other people too. Theoretically, if he could hone the skill enough, he might be able to hide a whole army in plain sight, and it makes him greedy for more. With

this power alone, he could infiltrate any number of secured buildings. He could find a way to knock that gluttonous Orkiva *tsar* right off his throne. He could ring in a new era for the Grisha of the world.

It's not enough. He needs more. He needs all of it — every drop of knowledge that he can wring from these journals and turn into a weapon. What he has accomplished even with the cloaking is only the beginning of what his abilities are capable of, and that doesn't even get into the use of *merzost*.

That need for more sends him into a tailspin as he tries to decipher the less coherent journals from Ilya's final years. They're less linear than those that came before — scrambled thoughts and half-finished ideas that he only occasionally circles back to. It makes Aleksander's head swim to read, but he tries to follow the logic.

Animals killed and brought back from the dead, with specific notes for what to fix when the tests went wrong and instructions on how to repeat them when they succeeded.

Aleksander is hungry for it. *Merzost* is going to tip the scales in his favor. Grisha alone might not be able to create matter, but with the right tools, the right practice, he can. He isn't beholden to the small science, and he refuses to be fettered anymore.

He can create life. He can create energy, and matter, and power. He can will all these things into being because his mother was right — he is *better* than everyone else. Their worlds are too tiny, too narrow and limited to the realities of a single lifetime, but he can see the big picture.

If he is going to have a future with his *solnishka*, he will have to build it for them first. Brick by brick he will craft the life they both deserve. He will give her a throne to sit on and a kingdom to rule.

His mother grows weary of the caves after the first few months. She decides to stay in Yovlinskya until he's ready to depart, and he doesn't try to stop her.

When she leaves, he begins trying to combine his summoning abilities with *merzost*, needing to know what is possible.

He can understand Ilya Morozova's madness now. Aleksander is certain that he will never again be satisfied with anything less than this kind of weapon at his fingertips.

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He works at it every day for six months, a year, two years.

He barely sees Alinochka at all in that time, but he tries not to let it bother him. She is safe, and he will make the world better for her.

His mother moves to the neighboring town of Os Ventya when her stay in Yovlinskya goes on for too long. She visits sometimes, but months go by in between, and he hardly notices the time passing at all. There is too much to do, too much to learn.

“You should come into town,” his *madraya* says on one of her visits. “You’ve been too alone here without any company.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off the passage in the journal he’s been studying. The writing here is worn by time and written in a dense, messy scrawl. He’s never managed to decipher the full page.

“I’ve never had company. Even in towns. Even among Grisha. Don’t let’s pretend that my being here is any different.”

“You may have to be careful among others, but at least it isn’t complete isolation.”

He’s not in the mood to argue or even converse, and his tone stays neutral. “I never played with other children. I never touched other children. I’ve never had normal friendships with people my age.” The exception to this rule is his secret. Even after a quarter century, he has never told his mother about the dreams. They are his. “So I don’t see how staying in the caves is any different. I don’t need interaction. They aren’t my equals.”

She doesn’t bother to argue any of his points. They’re all true, and they both know that every precaution in their lives has been necessary. He is alive because of those rules. And now he thrives in solitude because of them. “Humans aren’t built to be so alone.”

“I’m not human.”

There’s a long pause, and finally he sighs and closes the book so that he can raise his eyes to meet his mother’s.

“You don’t believe that.”

“Don’t I? Don’t you?”

She stalks across the fallen leaves before gripping him forcefully by the chin.

“I raised the greatest summoner ever to exist. I protected you with my life, and I let hundreds of people be sacrificed to ensure your safety.” Her fingers pinch tighter. “But you are not a god. You would burn on a pyre as easily as any other man.”

He isn’t sure that’s true. The more he learns, the more he wonders, but he’s not quite mad enough to test the theory.

She narrows her eyes when he offers no response. Let her think what she will.

“Don’t let Ilya fill your head with nonsense. He is dead, and we are here. There’s a reason for that, boy.”

“When I’m three hundred,” he says nonchalantly, “will you still be calling me *boy* like a naughty child?”

“Will you still be acting the fool at three hundred?”

He shrugs. “I am what you made me.”

She makes a groaning noise, as though she might spit on him for the insult, but in the end she doesn’t bother to refute him. He is exactly the man she trained him to become.

When she leaves the next morning for the journey back to Os Ventya, he doubles down on his work. There is so much to master.

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“You look tired.”

“You always say that. Why can’t you ever start with *solnishka, light of the universe, you are looking radiant today*, hm? It would be an improvement.”

He smiles. “*Solnishka, light of the universe, my sun and stars, you are looking radiant today.*”

“See, now maybe I’ll be in a better mood than last night.”

He takes her hand in his own. It’s bony beneath his fingers, but he doesn’t draw attention to that. She has seemed even more diminished recently, and the few times that he gets to see her anymore are cherished. Sacred. He doesn’t want to ruin that.

“What happened last night?” He asks instead, preparing to hear another story about how Karine and Lizabeta got up to some kind of mischief and got the whole of the girls’ dormitory reprimanded. Sometimes he feels that he knows more about the children in Alinochka’s life than any of those he’d grown up with years ago.

She gives him a teasing look, like she can’t quite tell what game she’s playing. “You told me I looked tired.”

His head shakes. “No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did. It was the first thing you said when I found you. *Solnishka, you look so tired tonight. Are you taking care of yourself?* And then I told you that if you were so concerned, maybe you should stop bothering me during my beauty sleep.”

“I remember,” he breathes out. “But that wasn’t last night.”

“Yes it was. How are you this forgetful already? You’ll never make it to one hundred like this.”

He’s never questioned it before, but pieces start falling into place. Why is she still living in the orphanage when she must be full grown? They’d been kids together, only a few years old. Even if he was older than her, it couldn’t have been by much. She should have aged out of the orphanage years ago.

“How old are you?”

She laughs. “What? Why?”

“Just answer.”

“Seventeen. Eighteen soon, but they aren’t going to make me leave right away. I’m not sure where else I’d go.”

“And you said you saw me last night?”

“Of course.”

“And the night before? Or any of the nights in the last week?”

“Most of them. But I don’t understand what the issue is. You’re here for all of them too. You should remember.”

“I do. But they weren’t last night for me, or last week. I haven’t seen you for nearly a month now.”

“Why?”

He frowns, trying to understand. “The dreams are moving at different paces for us. Maybe I need more years to do whatever has to be done before I can find you, and it’s spreading them thinner to compensate.”

“It? You’re making it sound like there’s some living thing deciding how our dreams work.”

“Isn’t there? Not a sentient being, but there is something. Whatever the *odinakovost* is between us that connects us across time, it knows what it’s doing. It allows us to meet in this between space until we find each other.”

“So you’re... not seventeen?”

“Do I look seventeen?”

“I guess not. I never really thought about it. They’re dreams — they don’t have to look perfectly logical to still make sense.”

“You always appear exactly as you are though, no matter how ill you’ve become. I must be the same.”

“So how old are you?”

“Nearly twenty-five.”

“And you only see me every few weeks?”

“Yes. Sometimes the gaps are longer or shorter, but there is always a gap. I haven’t had the dreams multiple nights in a row since we were very young.”

She squeezes his fingers between her own. Her skin is colder than usual, and he wants to ask her to summon if only to provide her some warmth.

“Why does that trouble you?”

“A few reasons.”

She waits a moment before trying to cajole him into continuing. “Come on, out with it.”

“Like I said, not only are we in different times, but we’re also on different timescales. Whatever it is we’re supposed to get from this, it’s happening faster for you and slower for me.”

“Maybe it just knows you have a thick skull and need extra time.”

He rolls his eyes and jostles her shoulder with his own, but secretly he’s glad she’s still finding ways to make jokes. It makes him feel less concerned.

“And I didn’t realize how quickly you were getting... more radiant. I thought it was happening over the span of years.”

“I’m fine.”

“For how long though? This can’t go on forever.”

“You’ll find me. You’ll wake me up.”

A territorial fervor comes over him. She’s right — *he* will find her. *He* will wake her up and make her safe. “I’ll do whatever it takes.” The words are almost violent, and he knows they must be a little startling to hear.

“But nothing drastic.”

“Whatever it takes, Alinochka.” He’s never called her that in the dreams before. Her eyes go wide at hearing it said in his voice. “I will do whatever it takes to get to you. I will kill anyone who stands in my way, and I will wake you up. I swear it, even if it’s the last thing I do. I will come for you.”

She swallows heavily, not sure how to respond.

“Do you understand me?”

She nods, silent.

“Are you afraid?”

“A little.”

“Of me?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I can be afraid of you. I know you too well. I’ve seen inside your head. Maybe I’m afraid that I’m not afraid enough.”

He’s not sure it’s true that she knows him too well anymore. If she’s seeing him every night, then the changes that overcome him from week to week would almost be too rapid for her to fully take in. She knows the heart of him, but there’s something festering underneath that is only just beginning to show itself.

Instead of telling her this, he pulls her into his chest, holding her tight. His nose gets buried in the hair at the top of her head, and he places the softest kiss there, hoping she doesn’t notice or doesn’t comment.

“I will come for you,” he repeats. “I will wake you up, and then you will remember who you’ve always been.”

She melts into him, and he only regrets that this isn’t something he can have every night the way that she can. For all that he’s working tirelessly to make himself into a weapon that can protect the Grisha, he might give it all up to simply take refuge in these dreams for eternity. He would not need the reality if he could live in a world of their design.

Her words come out quiet and calm. “I believe you.”

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It takes another year, during which he sees his mother only twice, before Alinochka tells him it’s her birthday.

“Really?” He’s a little shocked by it. Of course she must have a birthday, but somehow in all their years of friendship, the topic has never come up.

He tries to remember the date before it hits him that it doesn’t matter. The date in his time has no bearing on the date in hers. At the speed they’re moving, it could take him a decade or two before they make it to another of her birthdays.

“Or the next best thing, at least. Orphans don’t have true birthdays most of the time, so we get to choose.”

“And what makes this day so special that you decided to make it your birthday?”

“When I was a child, it was the first day that the flowers bloomed after the snows melted away.”

“And that’s why you chose it?”

She nods. “Seemed as good a reason as any when I was young. Apparently the flower that I pulled out of the ground to show the housekeeper was a weed, so I’m not sure it’s quite as romantic as it sounds, but it’s a nice memory to have.”

“I like it all the better for it having been a weed.”

“Why?”

“Flowers are finicky. They make me think of wealthy *otkazat’sya* in their hothouses with their teams of gardeners to keep their plants alive.”

“Oh? Do you spend a lot of time around wealthy people who employ gardeners?”

She never refers to them as *otkazat’sya*, something he’d noticed long ago. He supposes she has one foot in that world, no matter how little she belongs there.

“That’s not the point.”

“But flowers grow in the wild too. It’s not all meticulously planned.”

“And that’s exactly why I prefer the weeds — at least for metaphor’s sake.” He honestly has no opinion on either flowers or weeds in his everyday life. Either would just need throwing out when they wilted in the vase. “Nobody is growing them on purpose. Most people are actively trying to get rid of them. And yet they keep coming back, stubbornly persistent. They’re a bit like us.”

*Us.* Because she is not *otkazat’sya*, and he wants her to remember that. Whatever else she may be, she is a Grisha first.

“Is everything in your life centered around the fight for Grisha rights?”

“Yes. It’s the only fight that matters, the solution to our every problem.”

She would be stronger if Grisha weren’t forced into the shadows. He wouldn’t be a recluse who hides himself in dreams for fear of what anyone — his own people as well as the others — might do if they find him.

She sighs. “Then I hope you find your solution.”

“I will.” He’s closer to a true understanding of *merzost* every day that he works. It exhausts him, but it won’t be long, he hopes, until it’s another tool in his arsenal. He will be the sword that the world does not see coming, deadly sharp and truly aimed. “For all of us.”

She lays down in the grass, the light wind making it ripple around them.

Before she can say anything else, he turns to his side and plucks a golden flower from the ground. It's a weed just like they are, belonging nowhere and yet unavoidable. He thinks it's the loveliest flower he's ever seen.

"Happy birthday, *solnishka*."

When he hands it to her, she grins.

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"No!"

He throws down his hands in frustration, and the shadows disperse around him. Angrily, he flips the most recent of Ilya's books closed.

*So close.* He had been so close to something huge. That kernel of power, of magic and potential, had finally revealed itself inside of him, and it's not impossible to hone, but it remains difficult. It tires him more quickly than anything else.

Shadows are easy. They come to him like the breath in his lungs. It is sometimes more difficult *not* to summon, to hold back when his hands are itching to call forth the darkness.

*Merzost* is different. It wears him down inch by inch, like his soul is the forfeit for trying to create something from nothing.

Maybe, for all of Ilya's pontificating, it's *not* something from nothing. *Are we not all things?* There is a relationship between everything in this world, and the Grisha are able to, in limited capacities, tap into that. But *merzost* takes it a step further; he can turn pieces of himself into something new. It's a transfiguration of its own kind, in which his energy, his lifeforce is the starting material.

It's a dangerous game to play. He will have to be careful not to use too much. There is only so much of himself he can give away before he will have nothing left to rebuild from.

And once again, just as his practice had gotten close to yielding results, it failed him.

He spends the next week trying to figure out what this means in the long term. Can he harness energy from other sources? Is there a way to boost his own energy?

*Jurda* might do it, but it will require testing. The next time his *madraya* visits, he will ask about getting some *jurda* from the nearest town. They must sell it in Os Ventya.

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*Jurda* does not work well enough to solve his problems, and he starts over again.

Only three journals get thrown at the cave wall in frustration during the failed attempts, and he considers it good fortune that they are each still in one piece when he's calmed enough to look them over.

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He dreams of her, even when he doesn't.

He walks out from behind a tree, letting his fingers drag across the bark to ground him. When he makes it to the meadow, covered over in wisteria, he sees her sitting there, smiling up at him.

“*Solnishka*.” It’s light and unsteady in his voice. He hasn’t seen her in some time now, and it never fails to make him worry. He cannot chase her to her corner of the universe if something goes wrong, but it doesn’t stop him wishing he could.

“I missed you.”

“It couldn’t have been a long wait for you, right? It must have only been a night or two since our last meeting.”

She flushes. “Still, I always miss you.”

It’s almost unbearable to admit, even to himself, how gone he is for her. She could ask him for any prize and he would make himself her champion.

Maybe he should be stronger than this.

He isn’t.

“As do I,” he whispers.

She reaches out, letting her hand rest against his chest.

“But I’m here now.” Her hand trails up towards his shoulder, his neck. “So drink your fill while there’s still time.”

“You’re being,” he swallows, “too generous.”

He’s never kissed Alinochka before, but it’s not due to any lack of desire on his part. In fact, the longer he goes without, the more it seems to invade his mind, burrowing into every crack

and crevice until there is only an endless litany of *solnishka, solnishka, solnishka*. His little sun, so bright and overwhelming.

“Your cup runneth over,” she teases, leaning in. “Whatever will you do with your bounty?” Her lips graze his. He can feel her little puffs of breath against his mouth, and it only makes him want her more. His eyes flutter shut as his shadows call to her, needing more. She is the other half of his soul. “Please,” she continues, waiting for his signal. “Please, Aleksander.”

His eyes snap back open in alarm.

Of course. Of course, he’s so stupid.

“You’re not really here.”

Her fingers skate across his jawline, and he clenches it. Even entirely absent, she is every enticing thing to him.

It feels so real. Her touch, her breath. He has so few moments in life where he gets to be this close to someone else. Even with her, there is often a careful distance between them, like she’s afraid to cross a boundary and let herself truly care for a man who she won’t remember when the sun rouses her from sleep the next day.

But he longs — in a desperate, nearly pathetic way — for these small touches. These little intimacies. He would do anything to deserve them. He would burn nations and raise the dead if that’s what it took.

“What do you mean?”

He looks around, noticing, now that he’s more focused, how the scene doesn’t look quite right. It’s a little flatter than the places she imagines them, like stepping into a painting of a meadow instead of a real place.

He smiles sadly. “I’m dreaming.”

“You’re always dreaming when you’re with me.”

“Tonight I’m dreaming *of* you. Of what I want with you.”

“You can still have it.”

He leans in again, pressing a tender kiss to the space between her eyebrows, holding there for as long as he can bear. Something in him shakes loose — a hidden need that he’s tried to keep out of mind for as long as possible.

“I could,” he agrees. She’d never know, and there’s no harm in dreaming whatever he wishes. “But I’m hungry for every bit of you, every iota that I can steal away and hoard for myself. Anything less wouldn’t be enough.”

He’s had so little in his life that’s real. No real friendships or relationships. Even Alinochka is only real in his sleeping hours.

This one thing, he'd like to do right. He can wait. Time, if nothing else, is on their side.

He sighs. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow night. For real this time."

"Maybe," she says, but her voice echoes his own doubt back to him.

\*\*\*

He does not see her the next night, but he does make a small breakthrough with his studies, so he tries to consider it a victory in its own way.

### Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! The next few chapters are definitely going to get into the darker stuff you've been waiting for.

Comments are very appreciated!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait on this one! I'm trying to work through some prompts for charity I have from another fandom, so that's slowing down my ability to work on this fic. Hopefully this update tides you over for a little.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Occasionally, when it can't be helped, he goes into town.

He's been living for so many years in his hideaway that he almost doesn't remember what it's like to exist within society. The crush of bodies makes him uncomfortable, and he keeps his hands covered with gloves so that no Grisha trying to hide in plain sight might discover his amplifying abilities.

The stench of the large settlements makes him long to be back in the open wilderness, but he can only go so long without certain key supplies. With his mother's visits coming less and less frequently, he is cut off from necessities.

Merchants line the streets, yelling out to passersby in an attempt to hock their wares — “*best in Yovlinsky!*” — and he tries to slip past unnoticed. He has no desire to mingle.

There are conversations between people at the stalls about the news from Os Alta. The old Orkiva king has been deposed in a coup, and now some upstart noble — *Lastov?* *Lantsov?* the stories are inconsistent — sits on the throne. Anastas the Usurper, they call him.

Aleksander shakes his head. It doesn't matter. All *otkazat'sya* are the same. This one may be a little kinder or a little crueler, but the plight of the Grisha will continue ever on.

He manages to get himself enough salt to cure the meat from his hunts. Also, though it's not vital, he steals a bag of spices, a secret treat for himself. He'd rather it were something sweet, but at least the spice will make his meals more interesting for a few weeks.

“Sir!”

He ignores the voice as he has all the others, but a hand reaches out, latching onto his sleeve.

“Sir, if you please.”

He tries to shake them off, but they keep a firm grip.

“Not interested.”

“Sir, we’re raising money for the Church of Sankta Maradi. Would you care to donate?”

“Not today.”

He turns, seeing the small woman accosting him. She wears a faded *sarafan* and a headcovering over her gray hair.

“Perhaps you will stop inside to pray then,” she says, unbothered by his lack of interest in their conversation. There is something painfully earnest behind her eyes.

“I’m very busy unfortunately.” He might’ve just said no, but he somehow thinks this woman might desire that answer more. She could take it upon herself to convert a heretic. Better to appear unavailable rather than overtly disinterested.

She pulls a booklet out of the front of her apron. It’s not bound like an expensive book would be, but it’s still fairly thick. As she places it in his gloved hand, he wonders how many such booklets she keeps, and how exactly she has them in the first place to give away. It can’t be cheap to produce them even without a fancy binding.

The front is instantly recognizable, even if he’s never read the book in question before. The *Istorii Sankt’ya* — the Lives of Saints. Even divested of its traditional red cover, it’s unmistakable.

He tries to hand it back, but she refuses to take it.

“May Sankta Maradi bless you, sir. Take that for safe keeping. You might find yourself needing it.”

He frowns, but decides it isn’t worth the fight. If he’s trying to remain inconspicuous, the last thing he needs to do is pick an argument with an old zealot.

“Thank you.”

He should leave it somewhere for some wayward soul to find, but for whatever reason, he’s still holding it when he makes his way out of town to begin the long walk back to the caves.

He’s still holding it days later when he returns home.

At least it’ll be useful for keeping the fire lit.

\*\*\*

That night, he dreams of *solnishka* again. He knows it isn’t really her immediately, because they’re in Yovlinsky together, Sankta Maradi’s church decorating the sky behind them.

She dances through the streets like a ball of energy. Her soul is sunlight, grateful to finally be freed from where it's been hidden away.

He can't help but smile as he watches her. Every person he'd avoided in the market — selling food, selling flowers, selling goods — seems to catch her interest, and even knowing it's a false reality, he still enjoys seeing her so happy. Every true visit these days has her looking more and more tired, and selfishly he likes to see her like this, even if it's only a product of his own imagination.

When he wakes with the smell of the flower crown she'd put in her hair still filling his nose, he picks up the copy of the *Istorii Sankt'ya*, flipping immediately to Sankta Maradi's page.

His heart stutters in his chest at the words listed on the top.

#### *Sankta Maradi — Patron Saint of Impossible Love*

Curious, he reads through the unfamiliar tale of Duli and Baya in Novyi Zem, who fell in love with each other in spite of their families' rivalry. It is only through Maradi's intercession that they managed to escape and be together.

It's a silly story — he would love it if the only thing separating him from Alinochka were as simple as two unsupportive families — but there's something in it that still tugs at his heart.

Maybe he should've stopped in for a prayer when the old woman recommended it after all. Like Sankta Maradi, impossible love is his unfortunate companion.

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The days grow shorter with the seasons, and he finds himself increasingly drawn towards sleep. He spends long mornings and early nights curled up around the spare blankets he keeps, trying to find her in his mind. Even when he can't — when she isn't there at all — he sees her.

It's not enough, but it's what he has, and more hours are dedicated to the pursuit of her. It is impossible to stay away. She is *kvas* to a man who survives only because of his drink. He cannot help but try.

\*\*\*

“I'd like to learn to ride a horse.”

He glances over at her, seeing her sitting beside him as if there hadn't been a gap of weeks between their visits. As if she'd never left his side in the first place.

"I could teach you."

"You're good at everything, you know. I don't think that's very fair."

He smiles, entranced by the way her dark hair spills across the top of her nightgown. Most of her nightclothes are thick and off-white to the point of looking almost grey, but this dress is daintier. Prettier. It has pink and yellow flowers embroidered at the shoulders and down the sleeves.

It wouldn't be cheap to own, even if the fabric itself is still the same roughspun. He isn't sure if she embroidered it herself, or if it was passed down from another child, or if she's merely imagining it into being.

He reaches out to pinch the sleeve's edge between two fingers.

"I'm not good at everything. And I've had a lot of opportunities to learn. After all, I'm older than you now."

She grins. "Terribly, lecherously old. The staff at the orphanage would have heart attacks if they knew that I visited you each night."

"They'd think I meant to steal you away under cover of darkness and make you my bride."

Her eyebrow quirks up. "Don't you mean to?"

"Maybe. But they don't have to know that." His fingers trace over the embroidery, knuckles brushing against the soft skin of her arm.

"Stealing away under cover of darkness does seem to be your specialty."

"We all have our skills," he says with a smirk. "But I wouldn't need to steal you away. You could disappear in your own flash of light and I would simply follow."

"What if I ran to Os Alta?"

He thinks of the new king there, probably eager to prove himself strong in the eyes of those who distrust him. It would be easy to take that aggression out on the Grisha. They have always been a safe group to target. The common enemy.

"I would follow you."

"Or Shu Han?"

"I would follow you."

"Would you follow me to Fjerdia? Or across the sea to Kerch or Novyi Zem?"

He nods. "Yes. I would follow you."

"You indulge me too much."

"We have an eternity to indulge each other. Maybe you can let me have the next century."

The more accurate truth is simply that he doesn't know how else to be. If she went somewhere, he would follow. Chase her, even, if that was necessary. It is only time that stops him from forcing his way to her side now. When they finally exist in the same world, he will have no such restraints.

She looks down, a small smile on her face. "All right then." She glances up through her lashes. "I won't make it very easy for you, you know."

"When have you ever?"

A laugh spills from her lips. "Fair point."

She tilts her face up to the sun, and the shadows beneath her eyes show themselves in starker contrast. The hollows of her cheeks seem worse somehow too.

"You look tired," he murmurs, not wanting to upset her.

"You say the same thing every night."

"You should rest."

"I am resting."

"Are you though? You could try to sleep here. Or at least lie down." He gestures to the grass around them.

"Can a person sleep within a dream?" Her nose scrunches up. "That seems illogical."

"Nothing about this has ever been logical. But even still, you might rest without sleeping. We don't know how any of it works."

"You're such a worrier," she huffs, but dutifully leans back until her hair is spread out in a halo around her. She squints up at him. "What are you waiting for? You can't watch me sleep all night." She pulls on his sleeve. "Lay down."

"You're so pushy."

He moves anyway, coming to rest beside her. There is a strip of grass separating them, but she turns on her side, laying her face in her hands while she watches him.

"And you want me to be pushy for eternity, so it's time you get used to it."

His fingertips brush so lightly over her cheekbone.

“I want all of you for eternity, *solnishka*,” he says, no hint of humor in his words. “So sleep now, so that you might feel better when you wake up.”

“You’ll stay?”

Her eyes flutter closed.

“Where else would I go?”

Her face scrunched up, like that answer wasn’t enough.

“I’ll stay, *Alinochka*. There’s no place else I’d want to be.” *I belong beside you. No one else will have what is mine.*

She nods, nuzzling her face further into her own cupped palms.

“I like it when you’re touching me.” Though her cheeks have the faintest hint of a flush to them, she says it with conviction and doesn’t try to take the words back.

“Would it help you to sleep?”

She smiles, eyes still closed. “Maybe. But you should do it either way.”

He lets his hand rest on her other cheek, thumb rubbing at her temple. She lets out a gentle sigh at the feeling.

“Is it the amplifier?” He can feel the buzz where his skin meets hers, the subtle tremor that runs along the length of their bond.

“Mm,” she mumbles. “That’s nice too, I suppose.”

Eventually, she seems to sink into a deeper state, though whether it’s truly another layer of sleep he can’t say. She goes quiet, her breaths even and steady, and he lets himself brush back the hair from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear.

He might not see her again for months, but he doesn’t mind losing this time with her. Not if it will make her feel better, even for a little while.

Instead, he watches over her all night.

\*\*\*

“I’m going to Ketterdam for a while. It’ll be easy enough to lay low in the slums.”

He looks at his mother, unease gripping him.

“You know it’s not safe there.”

It's not safe anywhere, but that goes unsaid. Some places are still riskier than others, and the people of Kerch are loyal only to money. They will do anything to increase their wealth.

“If you’re smart enough and keep moving, you can get by anywhere. I taught you that, didn’t I, boy? I know you’ve decided to hide yourself away here for years like a hermit, but it shouldn’t be *quite* so easy to forget what I tell you.”

She sounds irritated, but he doesn’t rise to her bait anymore.

“You’ll be safe?”

“You could come with me, you know. There’s a lot to learn at the universities. It might do you some good.”

She sniffs, looking around his cave dwelling like he’s become some kind of wild creature after all of these years alone. And maybe he has — maybe the lack of any contact with humans has been bad for him — but it’s hardly worse than what he had before. Always running. Always keeping himself apart from the others for fear of being touched. At least this life has a measure of stability.

There is a lot for him to learn, but the answers he needs won’t be found in Ketterdam’s libraries.

“I’ll stay. I haven’t finished with my work here.”

“You’re looking for answers in the head of a madman and expecting that they will lead you to a different end. Don’t make yourself a fool, *moi schast’ye*. Stop playing with things best left alone.”

“There’s too much left for me to do.”

“You think yourself the hero of the Grisha, and your head is filled with fantasy as a result! There are no winners here, only survivors. Don’t waste your time and your talents trying to save others when what you *need* to do is worry about yourself.”

“I can help them. I know I can. No one has succeeded because no one has had our level of power before. I can change that.”

She looks down her nose at him, though he’s been taller than her for years now. “I hate having to watch you act like an utter imbecile.”

He clenches his jaw, leveling her with a glare. “Then go to Kerch so you can look away.”

She complains some more — about how ungrateful and idiotic he’s being, how he must be intentionally trying to irritate her — but eventually she must realize it’s doing nothing.

Two days later, she leaves for a port on the coast that will grant her passage to Kerch.

He expects he won’t see her again for a long time.

\*\*\*

A few weeks after his mother's departure, he has his first real breakthrough.

*Merzost* is something that he understands slowly, the knowledge sneaking through the cracks. It isn't until he works through a section of the diary that has been nearly impossible to read that it finally clicks for him.

He can feel that place inside of him that's connected to the making at the heart of the world — the part that ties him to his abilities and to the *odinakovost*, the thisness of all that surrounds him.

The more he can sense it, working to manipulate and expand it, the more he feels comfortable *pulling* from it.

It reminds him of the tether he's pulled once or twice between himself and Alinochka. With this though, instead of trying to pull her somewhere, he knows that he will be pulling apart bits of himself.

*Merzost is a blight*, his mother had always said. Ilya had been the only one foolish enough to make himself so weak for his craft. If Aleksander is to follow, to use this abomination to do what's never been done in order to protect the Grisha, then he has to be willing to make sacrifices.

The first night that he is bold enough to attempt it, he feels the universe demand its price.

*What part of yourself are you willing to lose*, it asks, *for the promise of power?*

A chill moves down his spine at the unasked question. He swallows thickly, closing his eyes. This is only meant to be a test. He cannot give up anything that he knows he needs to keep.

What is he willing to lose?

A memory comes to him unbidden.

*A new mother in the village they'd moved to. She was young, only perhaps nineteen or twenty, but the baby on her hip was already a few months old. She'd donned a dirty apron and held the child close to her, and though her eyes looked tired, the smile on her face seemed to light the whole street.*

*He was young too — eight maybe, and with another identity that he couldn't remember. He didn't know anyone in this new town, and his mother had smacked his hand when he mentioned wanting to go out and play. He'd known the rules, but it was so easy to forget back then. So easy to imagine that things might one day be different, or that some town might finally be safe enough.*

*No town was safe enough, so he sat by the windowsill of their new home — more hovel than house, really — and watched as the others enjoyed the rare warm evening.*

*The woman with the baby smiled at him from across the way, beaconing him over.*

*His mother would say not to go if she was there. She would say it was far too dangerous to have him meeting strangers alone at so young an age. Even when he was trying to be good, it was difficult. Her rules were seared into his skin, but that didn't mean he knew how to react if someone else unknowingly tried to sidestep them.*

*But the woman had pryaniki cookies, and a warm smile on her face, and he wanted very badly to eat one.*

*So he shuffled out the door and across the little lane.*

*“My, you look very bored today. Don’t you want to play with the other children?” When she spoke to him, it wasn’t as though he was a child, but it also was not the way his madraya spoke to him, either. It was like she saw him as his own person and was actually curious to know his answer.*

*He thought about what it had been like to play tag with solnishka. That night was the most free he had ever felt.*

*“Yes. But I’m too sick to play.” It was the easiest lie to make believable at any given time, and his mother made sure he used it often.*

*“Ah, lapushka, that is too bad.” She smiled. “But are you too sick for a cookie, perhaps?” The baby at her side giggled, pulling at the hairs that had come free of her otherwise neat bun.*

*He watched warily. “Will you tell my madraya?”*

*She picked one up, holding it out to him. He could take it without even touching her skin, and he did.*

*“It will be our secret, I think. You’ll have to let me know if you like it. I want to have the recipe just right by the time this one is old enough to eat them.”*

*The joy on her face was frighteningly unfamiliar, and he wanted to bask in it, but he only smiled and offered his thanks before retreating back into his little house.*

*He ate the pryaniki while sitting in the window again, and though the woman eventually went inside, he didn’t stop thinking about her.*

*Dark hair and bright eyes. A softly radiant sort of happiness, even through her own exhaustion. She reminded him a little of his solnishka and the person he dreamed she might become one day. Tired, maybe. But joyful too. Someone who always saw the good.*

*He spent the rest of the afternoon imagining all the ways a grown up Sasha might make her smile like the woman had, and it filled him with his own little fluttering of joy.*

It's not a memory of Alinochka. Not really. It's a memory around her, but not one that she features in, and that makes it expendable enough, even if it had been genuine and lovely in its simplicity. He has so few memories of his childhood that were pleasant outside of the dreams.

He holds out his palms, as though offering it up in supplication. It makes his insides twist to give it away, but that small bit of warmth will be worth the power this might give him.

The memory untangles itself from his mind, and he can feel when the final strand pulls itself free. Then—

Nothing. He doesn't know what is gone. He doesn't know what the world has taken, what the price is for this magic, but a well of darkness begins to unfold in his hands.

It's different from his shadows. Those are the absence of light, the corners where the children think that monsters lurk.

This is *absence*. There is nothing in this but the curse of eternal night, and it's the kind of tar-black that would turn a man into the monsters he'd once feared.

It sits heavily in his hands, almost burning his fingertips, but he doesn't pull away. It is a concentrated mass of energy — of pain and terror and chaos.

It will be their salvation, and he is enraptured by it.

\*\*\*

When he folds his hands closed later, after spending as long as he could studying the darkness before finally allowing it to be extinguished, he tries not to wonder what he lost to create it.

Just that little bit of power had stolen a piece of him away. He knows the greatest struggle now will be to find a way to do it again — bigger, darker, deadlier — without losing himself in the process.

His candle burns long into the night as he plans.

## Chapter End Notes

The creation of the fold is going to be a little different in this story, but I'm really excited to get to show you how I imagine it playing out!

Comments are very appreciated! Thanks to everyone who has left one already — this fandom is so kind!



# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

I've been reading all your predictions for where this is going, and let me just say that SEVERAL TIMES I've considered throwing out all my plans and writing those stories instead. You all have such interesting theories! Thanks for taking the time to comment and let me know how you've been finding it so far!

Warning in this chapter for brief discussions of animal cruelty.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He dreams of her that night — finally. He smiles when he sees her, and she grins in return, though he can't help but notice that an ominous cloud cover seems to lurk at the edges of their space. The sky above is bright and blue, but on the horizon...

His jaw clenches whenever he catches sight of it. Try as he might, he can't make it disappear, which means they're still in her dream. She's bringing this darkness to them, and he doesn't know why.

He doesn't ask about it — he's not even sure she's aware that it's there — but it doesn't stop him from wondering. Why would this shadow be lurking at the edges of her mind? Does she know what he intends to do? Is there some way, even subconsciously, that she knows he has succeeded in using *merzost* on a small scale? Is it his destiny to succeed enough that even in her time, his creation still inspires a sense of awe and fear? Or is he making something out of nothing?

There is a part of him, terrifying and empowering, that wants to turn her inside out in order to get the answers he seeks. He wants to know her mind from beginning to end, to understand her every quirk. If she is manifesting darkness in this dream, then he will know why. She will have no secrets from him because he will lurk in the corners of her every thought.

Her hair spills down onto another nightdress, sheer and frilly and innocent. She looks sweet in it, and yet there's nothing at all sweet about the way his eyes trace over the curve of her breasts beneath the fabric. His hands clench into fists in an attempt to curb the desire to ruck the dress up around her hips and discover what — if anything — is underneath.

The worst part is that she knows exactly what he is thinking as his eyes sweep over her, a small smirk on her lips.

“Remember when we used to play tag?” She asks from her place on the grass beside him.

“How could I forget? You used to cheat.”

She looks affronted. “How could I cheat? It’s a chasing game; speed is the only objective.”

He smiles. “Once, you purposely fell and pretended to cry until I came over to check on you. Then you tagged me. Hardly seems very fair, Alinochka.”

“And *sometimes* it’s a psychological game. You’re just bitter that I’m better at it because I know how to play to my advantages.”

“Because you knew I’d be worried about you getting hurt? I could’ve done the same, but unlike you, I don’t have to scheme to win.”

“Because I knew,” she says, giving him a look heavy with meaning, “that you would do stupid things if you thought I was at risk.”

Suddenly he feels like he’s the one turned inside out, and she can see each disgusting, horrible piece of him. Like she can see the lengths he would go to in her name, and she can’t decide how to feel about it.

But then her smile returns, a playful gleam in her eyes.

She reaches out a hand, touching it carefully to his cheek.

“You’re it,” she whispers, before pulling away in a rush and rising to her feet to put space between them.

“You want me to chase you?” He asks, bewildered by her energy, even if it feels like watching flowers bloom at the edges of winter.

Her grin is far too coquettish to be accidental. She knows exactly what she does to him and now finds it funny to torment him with it. “Mhm. Don’t you want to?”

Deftly, he stands. “And what happens when you’re caught?”

“Seems like a useless question to ask when you haven’t yet caught me.” She backs away further, eyes never leaving him. If he didn’t know any better, he would think she is the predator and he the prey.

“But as you’ve kindly reminded me, chasing and catching is rather the point of the game.”

She laughs. “Then you can decide upon a prize when you’ve managed the task, hm?”

“You might regret giving me so much freedom to decide,” he warns. “I’m not sure I’m a very forgiving captor. I’m terribly possessive of my treasures.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “And yet I challenged you anyway.”

He returns her grin. If she is trying to tease him, she will get all that she asks for.

“Then I suggest,” he says, taking a leisurely step towards her, “that you start running.”

She takes off, darting between trees and through thick grasses. He gives chase, never moving as fast as he could because he doesn't want it to end too soon. Her laughter floats through the air, the sound infused with the joys of spring, and it would be a crime to cut that short.

Whenever he gets close, he allows her to put a few trees between them, a barrier to keep the maiden from the monster. They would never be enough to keep him from her if necessary, but they allow her these pleasant moments of victory as she sidesteps him and dances away.

"I'm starting to think you aren't as frightening as you claim to be," she taunts. "Sasha, the summoner of darkness and night, who cannot catch one waif in the woods."

"I prefer my prisoners to be overconfident. Makes them so much easier to take down."

"Your prisoner? Big words for someone who can't—"

He dives around a tree, catching her around her waist and pulling her against him so that she can't break free.

"You were saying?"

She looks up at him with far too much mirth. "That I'm your prisoner, obviously."

"So you are."

"And have you decided what happens when I'm caught?" She twists in his arms until her front is pressed to his. He can feel her pebbled nipples through the fabric of their nightclothes. "Because I think you might've run out of time for philosophizing."

"I'm going to keep you, I think. I'm the dragon that guards your tower."

"Keeping others out or keeping me in?"

He squints at her in thought. "I'm not sure. Both, maybe."

It should concern her to hear these hidden, terrible thoughts, but her expression doesn't change.

"If someone has to be my jailer, I suppose you'd be a tolerable one." Her finger drags across his collarbone.

He looks her over with an appraising eye, trying to keep a serious look on his face. "You're a bit too pleased for a prisoner. I should do something to put the fear of the saints in your heart."

"Maybe you just haven't realized yet that I'm the one in control."

An amused laugh spills from his lips. "Are you?"

"Maybe. Let's recount. I orchestrated a way to get close to you—"

“To be *caught* by me.”

“—knowing that you’d be unable to resist my challenge. You think you’ve won, but I’d argue that I’ve been playing you this whole time.”

“I wasn’t unaware of your motives.”

He watches as she settles her hand just underneath the collar of his shirt, skin pressed to warm skin.

“And yet you still played right into them.”

“They’re—” He swallows. “They’re mutual goals, Alinochka.”

He looks around carefully, checking their surroundings for that flatness that would mean she isn’t really here again, but everything looks normal aside from that darkness on the horizon.

“Are they?” She asks, leaning up on her tiptoes so that she can look at him more directly.

“Then tell me the answer to your question, Sasha. What happens when you catch me?”

He removes one arm from around her waist to let his fingertips run down her side and along her leg. Only the paper-thin nightgown separates them. She lets out a tiny whining sound, pushing closer to him.

“You won’t remember this when you wake up,” he reminds her.

“Then make it a good enough memory that I’ll get to indulge in it when I finally remember.”

*A good enough memory*, as though he isn’t desperate to destroy her a little, to tear her apart into a million pieces until all that’s left is her desire for him. He wants to stamp his name onto her heart, to own whatever is left after he unravels her at the seams.

“I can do that,” he says instead.

He hadn’t wanted to kiss her until it was real, but the truth is, there is little more real than the two of them in their own universe, hidden away from a world that neither desires nor deserves their existence.

He slides his hand over her jaw, reminding her how much *bigger* than her he is. Then he tips her head back until it’s just on the verge of looking uncomfortable before sealing his lips to hers.

She meets him with equal fervor, as though she has likewise been holding herself back for too many nights. As though, somehow, against all odds, he has tormented her as much as she has ruined him.

There is nothing in the world he wouldn’t protect her from except himself. If she has been undone by him, all the better. He would revel in knowing that they are destroying each other in equal measure.

He sinks further into it, kissing her more deeply, his free hand roving everywhere at once. His other remains on her jaw, holding her firmly to him, curled around her face as a reminder.

“Mine,” he snarls. There will be no one else for her, even in the daytime when she forgets him. No matter what happens in those hours, she belongs with him.

She belongs *to* him. And one day he will find her and make her finally his. He will steal her away from the orphanage like a thief in the night — the man who stole the sun. Their tether would allow for no other possibilities.

Her hands bury themselves in his hair, mussing it up every direction, but it only makes his kisses more urgent. He finds his hand moving down her hip, her thigh, until finally he’s letting it sink into her skin so he can lift her up. She goes willingly, her tiptoes leaving the dirt beneath them so she can wrap her legs around his torso.

“Yours, Sasha,” she whispers brokenly against his lips. The words come out so small, so breathy, and yet not the least bit frightened. Whatever else she is — however she might feel about his need to possess her — she isn’t scared of him.

Maybe she should be. The overwhelming feeling in his chest that he feels when she’s near could crush both of them easily. He might welcome such an end, but she shouldn’t be so forgiving.

He’s not selfless enough to tell her any of that. If she already knows, she doesn’t let on.

She shifts herself against him until she has the height advantage, leaning down over him and taking control of the kiss, demanding *more, more, more*.

It’s the easiest concession he’s ever made.

“I’m yours,” she says again between heated, frantic kisses. “And you’re *mine*.”

He drops to his knees, laying her in the grass before him so that he can curve his body above hers, the eclipse that covers her light.

“Alinochka.” He whispers the word into her skin, a prayer to a vengeful goddess. “You’re going to ruin me.”

She smiles, wrapping her legs around him again to pull him against her. He groans when his hips meet hers. “Good. I’d like to see you ruined.”

“I’m going to destroy you in return. I don’t even mean to,” he says, kissing down her neck as she arches against him. “I just don’t know how to love you any less.”

Her hand comes up to rest on his cheek, pushing him back so that she can look into his eyes as her thumb traces his bottom lip.

“You love me?”

“Was it a secret?” He asks, eyebrow raised. He’s not embarrassed. He’s not shy. This feeling is cosmic — it might very well have existed since the beginning of time. Before there was an Alina or an Aleksander on this earth, he knows he still somehow loved her. And in a million years, when even her sunlight has faded into nothing, he will love her then. Dust in the grave or ashes on the pyre — this bond will remain. “I don’t hide anything well from you.”

“It wasn’t a secret.” There’s a smile on her face. Even without her powers, she is the light. She is the buttery yellow warmth that sustains him. “I just wanted to hear you say it again.”

“I love you.” He kisses her forehead, the tip of her nose, her cheek, her jaw. The corner of her lip — just a teasing thing. “I love you. I love you.”

There have been so few moments in his life that feel truly happy, and every one of them has been with her. The world has stolen so much from him — a home, a childhood, a true family, the feelings of peace and safety. But he has always had her, and in this moment, he can imagine no life better.

He can wait for her. Not just because he has to, but because she is worth it. She is worth every bit of pain that will try to shatter him, and he will be ready for her when it is finally time. There will be no one powerful enough to stop him — no Fjerdan *dr üskelle* or Shu alchemist or Kerch slaver. No one will keep him from her side.

And in that time, he will remake the world for her. Even if it doesn’t look different enough for her to feel safe in her time, that only means there is still more to be done. When he has her, she can help him complete his life’s mission. But first, he has to start.

There is a lot to be done if he is going to give her what she deserves. Safety. Security. Power, even. Maybe a throne, if he can achieve his goals the way he’d like to. He will create a weapon, and then he will remake Ravka in her name.

“I love you,” he says again, the words all that’s left in him.

When she opens her mouth to respond, he leans down to kiss it, quieting her again.

As he pulls away, he asks her, “You love me?” She nods, staring up at him with doe eyes. “Then there will be time enough for you to tell me when we’re in a real forest under the real sky.”

“Why do you want me to wait?”

“Because when you say it, I want to know that there is no other. That there will be no other. That you are *mine* and that you know it, in dreams and in the light of day.”

She swallows thickly, her gaze never wavering from his own. “It might be a long time for you. You could be waiting years...”

“I told you that you would be my undoing.” He places an open mouthed kiss on her throat, marking her in the hopes that she might carry it with her in the morning. “And now all that’s

left is to lean into my own destruction. I will have you, Alinochka. I can be patient until then.”

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For several days after their meeting, he finds himself hesitating to practice the use of *merzost*.

There are memories that he doesn’t treasure and therefore wouldn’t mind giving away, but he worries that they won’t be worth anything for that very reason. The magic is unnatural; it requires sacrifice. If he is not willing to give anything away, then it will not answer him.

If he is going to use it on a grander scale, he needs to find another way to make it happen. He needs to still be whole when this is all over, or else there will be nothing left of himself to give to Alinochka. While it seems noble to die in order to give her a better world, he isn’t quite so self-sacrificing. Unlike the saints in his copy of the *Istorii Sankt’ya* that sits in a corner of his cave getting covered in dirt, he is no martyr. If he makes a world for them to live in, he intends to be around long enough to enjoy it.

He gives in a few times, needing to be sure his use of *merzost* wasn’t a fluke, and each time he can’t remember what memory it takes. There are empty spaces that he carries within him for days after, knowing that something is gone and he can’t recall what it is. There are already so few memories of his life that he cherishes, and it hurts to know that a few are no longer with him.

It becomes his mission to figure out other alternatives. It doesn’t have to be memories presumably — only something paid in exchange for the *merzost*. No one, after all, can truly create something from nothing.

Tearing off a piece of the bread he’d made over the fire, he walks into the trees, whistling as he goes.

A little bluebird with a tan and white chest finds him first, and Aleksander tosses a few crumbs from the bread onto the ground. Though the bird looks at him warily, eventually he flies down from his perch so that he can inspect the food on the ground. When he deigns to eat it, Aleksander can’t help but smile.

The next day, the bird is still there — at least he assumes it’s the same one from before. He goes through the same motions, feeding the small thing who seems all too happy that the mysterious man with the food has returned.

He tries not to think about how much Alina would enjoy a scene like this. She would tease him mercilessly for it, but her eyes would shine.

On the third day, he lets the breadcrumbs rest in his palms. The bird stares at him for a moment as though unsure it’s worth being so near to another creature, but eventually he perches in Aleksander’s hand, eating merrily.

On the fourth day, while the bird eats, he reaches down inside of himself, finding that well of darkness that he'd tapped into the last time. When the bird notices him tensing up, he tries to flee, but Aleksander latches onto him, holding his small chest in his hand. The bird makes a tiny, frightened squawking noise.

Aleksander ignores it. Alinochka would probably scold him for this. Or maybe she would look at him with the air of fear that has always been absent in her expression. It doesn't matter. Ilya had known best when he'd performed his experiments on animals, and Aleksander is no different. If he wants to know what is possible, he has to be willing to try different possibilities. Otherwise, he will be a husk of a man without a single memory left to him, and that isn't a solution he's willing to entertain.

The bird cries out again as that same inky scar seems to cover the air before them. It's small, though bigger than the last time, and Aleksander is too busy marveling at it — the eerie opaqueness and how strangely quiet the forest around him goes when it appears — that he doesn't even notice that the bird in his hand has gone silent too. Silent and still.

Success brings a smile to his face. There is no emptiness in his chest, which means no memory has been taken.

He knows how he is going to create his weapon.

He knows how he will reshape Ravka — reshape the world even — to be exactly as he needs it.

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After years of trying to figure out how to manipulate *merzost*, he had assumed that finally discovering the answer would set things into motion quite quickly.

The reality is different.

It's not for lack of opportunity. He might've started out as soon as his test with the bird succeeded, but there was one thing that ate at the back of his mind until he gave in to its desire.

He can't start anything without telling Alina.

Of course, if he is to be successful in his time, then presumably she already knows about his weapon. About the shadow that will protect the Grisha and make them valuable to the lazy, repugnant kings. She must know, and therefore nothing he tells her can truly be a surprise.

But he has to do it anyway. He knows parts of his plan aren't pleasant, and he needs her absolution before he can try. And if she can't give him that, then at least he can give her time to process it in the dreams before he finds her in real life and she has to confront it head-on.

He doesn't want to drag Alina into his own darkness, but he has never felt the need to lie to her. To start now would only be asking for trouble.

So he waits for their next meeting, knowing that only after that can he start on the final act of his mission. It is gratifying to know that he can give her this, even if she might not thank him for it so soon.

Maybe he can even sneak a kiss in before he tells her. Before, perhaps, she decides that, for a long time, there will be no further kisses.

The thought does make his face twist up in distaste, but he is in too deep to turn back now. Someone has to be bold enough to make the tough decisions that will eventually fix what is broken. If no one else will protect the Grisha, he will.

While he waits, he finds himself paging through Morozova's journals. With the solution to his *merzost* problem found, he can waste away the days looking through the other scatterbrained ideas that only a genuinely mad genius could dream up.

There are notes for a special Grisha-made fabric. Stronger and more versatile than plate armor, it would protect the wearer from arrows and stabbings. Ilya had even drawn designs for different ideas on how he might use the fabric — there is everything from capes to hats that wrap around the entire head.

The one that Aleksander likes the most, though, is a simple, robe-like coat that would protect the wearer from both attacks and the elements. A *kefta*, Ilya had called it. Idly, he wonders if he could make such a thing. He has nothing but time, and though this was clearly a project meant for a trained fabrikator, Ilya had proven that anyone with enough desire and drive might master other skills.

After all, are we not all things?

With nothing to do until his next dream, which could very well be months away, he decides to try.

He travels to Os Ventya, not wanting to show his face too frequently in the nearer, smaller town of Yovlinskya. There, it takes four days to pickpocket enough money to buy the fabric he needs, but once he does, he carries it reverently home to the caves with him.

He puts his skills as both a Grisha and a sewist to good use. He feels lucky — for perhaps the first time — that traveling so much meant mending and sometimes making his own clothing. They didn't have the time to deal with tailors in most of the towns they visited.

It takes over two weeks to instill in the fabric the strength that he wants, and though it isn't *fully* stab-proof, he considers it a step up from what it had been before. Aleksander can only expect so much of himself, considering no *Ulle* or mentor or Grisha leader had ever taught him the skills of a materialnik.

He sews the first garment together with a needle of Grisha steel. It certainly isn't perfect, but that's why he'd chosen to make his own first. When the body is done, he decorates it with

intricate designs along the front, done in black so that they won't stand out if he messes up.

Then, when it's as good as he thinks it will ever be, he starts again, being far more careful in the second attempt.

His own *kefta* hardly matters in the scheme of things — not yet, at least. He will want to look better in the wake of creating his weapon in an effort to portray his own strength. He will make himself a monster in the eyes of the *otkazat'sya* if that will get him what he wants, and he knows part of that process is cultivating an image.

But for now, his own can be as bedraggled as it wants to be. Hers, though, should be perfect.

He creates each panel carefully, trying to be sure that it will fit her exactly as it should. It's almost torturous to spend so much time imagining her body when she is not there to tease him for it — when he cannot even try to kiss her and wipe the smug smile away — but it makes him feel closer to her in her absence, and that's enough most days.

When the *kefta* is fully constructed, he works diligently, day after day, to create swirling patterns of gold with his needlework. Each swirl takes him hours of squinting and pricking his fingers with the needle, but as he makes his way down the first side, he is sure that his effort will pay off. Her *kefta* will be nothing short of magnificent.

Each moment that he works on it gives him something to look forward to, and he spends many of the idle, quiet hours imagining her response when he can finally give it to her. By the time they meet, he might have a whole wardrobe of *keftas* made for her, but he will give her this first attempt before any other, no matter how lovely they might become over the years.

He's working on a tricky section near the collar when he hears her voice calling out to him for the first time while still awake.

“*Sasha—! Sasha, it's—*” Her voice quavers, and he thinks that their tether has snapped somehow, cutting her off. Then he hears it, quiet and afraid. “*It's so dark. Sasha, please. It's so dark.*”

The needle drops out of his hand.

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is where it's all gonna get very messy! Thanks for joining me through the buildup, and I can't wait to show you where it's all leading to!

Comments make my day!

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter includes **graphic depictions of violence**. I've been teasing it this whole time, but it's finally here. I don't want anyone to be surprised and upset when it occurs.

If you hate me halfway through this chapter, please just remind yourself that I promise this story has a happy (or happy enough) ending. What happens in this update isn't by any means the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*It's so dark. Sasha, please. It's so dark.*

The words have him nearly bashing his head into the cave wall in the hopes that knocking himself unconscious might send him to her faster.

He's never heard her voice in the daytime before. She's never called out to him through their bond, and he doesn't know what it means that suddenly she is. It can't be anything good — the sound of her voice was panicked. Terrified.

Of him? He can't be sure, but he knows what he'd been trying to do. A wall of darkness, grotesque and simple. A way to cow the people into having to listen to him. A weapon that even armies wouldn't know how to defeat. It had seemed so simple five minutes ago.

But even giving away memories and killing living things is nothing compared to the raw fear in her voice.

*It's so dark.*

He'd been afraid of the dark once, as silly as it seems now. He'd been frightened by his own power, by the mysteries that lurked in the murky black, and she had held his hand in hers and summoned the light until his fears had shattered around them. She had been the one comforting force in his life. Her light had become everything.

He feels her cries spinning circles in his head, looping until they grow in tenor, terror building upon terror. He can't escape it, and it makes him feel jittery. There is nothing he can do for her here — he is *useless* to her like this. He can only pace back and forth and try to tug on that link between them, praying to any force benevolent enough to answer that she might respond to him.

He has to know.

He has to know if she's okay.

He has to know if the darkness is his fault.

He has to know if he's the monster she's afraid of.

The thought makes his chest feel tight. For all of the terrible ideas he's had — for every necessary sacrifice he might yet still make in his path for justice — he had hoped that she would understand. He has always needed to imagine her still standing beside him when it's all said and done. He can be what every other person fears when they light a candle in the darkness, but not *her*: Not her.

She has never turned away from him before. She has never looked at him and seen anything less than an equal. Never anything less than the person who will be her future.

He still needs to be able to give that to her. They have eternity together, and he intends to be her home. There's time enough for her to learn to forgive him if necessary, but he'd rather she not fear him in the first place. He needs to explain—

If he can only explain himself to her, he is certain she will come to understand. The Grisha need protection. The Grisha *need* a weapon, and he is the only one willing to try. His solution might be inelegant — it might destroy indiscriminately — but their people have been hunted down for centuries. They have grown like spiteful little weeds under the shadows of hatred, and now there can be another way for them. With his shadows, they will thrive for the first time. He will give them hope.

She will understand that. He knows she will. If only she could stop sounding so terribly afraid.

When he finally falls asleep that night, having heard no more from her, he begs to be allowed to see her. To hold her small hands in his and make her understand.

She does not come. He dreams instead of Duli and Baya in Novyi Zem, crying out for Sankta Maradi's help to escape from their families so they might find happiness together instead of destruction.

Bay'a's father discovers his daughter's plan to escape with her love and smashes his entire fleet until no boat will carry her to him. She jumps into the water anyway, brave as ever. When the waves begin to pull her under, she calls out to Duli again and again, each cry becoming increasingly desperate as the water tries to fill her lungs. Though she can hear him calling back, he cannot find her. The clouds cover the moon until the water is nearly black. He cannot see anything. He cannot help her.

And Sankta Maradi —

The Sankta does nothing.

The clouds do not part at her will. This time, the lovers do not find each other. Bay'a's cries turn into gasps for breath, and eventually those turn into empty silence. When Duli calls her

name, only the waves respond. The sound is almost taunting. Duli's shouts become desperate, unhinged even, but they are met with no response as he jumps in the water to search.

Aleksander drags himself from the dream before he can learn what Duli intends to do next. He can imagine well enough what would've run through the boy's mind as his heart beats frantically in his chest. But it was only a dream.

It was only a dream, but somehow that doesn't comfort him.

He should've been seeing her, seeing if she was okay, and instead he saw that.

He's never been to a church service. He cares very little for the saints, considering they are all a mixture of fables that never truly happened and the martyrdom of Grisha who were misunderstood and vilified for offering their help. He doesn't think they are divine, and he places little weight on what a person long-dead might be able to do for him.

But he finds himself whispering the same word over and over again in supplication to this Sankta Maradi. This patron saint of impossible love.

*Please, he says, feeling more desperate than he ever has before. Please, please, please, please...*

The litany starts to feel never ending. If anything hears him — the saints, the gods, the stars themselves — he receives no reply.

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*“Sasha. Sasha, I have to do it. I can't see. I can't—” Her voice chokes out for a moment, overcome. “I can't help them otherwise. It's so dark.”*

It's nearly two full days later when he hears it, and he can't decide if that means that whatever is wrong is ongoing, or if once again the strange time dilation means that he is experiencing long gaps that she isn't. If he knew, maybe that would help him piece together what's wrong. Maybe he could—

But he can't. There's nothing he can do. Not from his cave. Not from the past. He can only wait for her next words, begging to understand what is happening. To know why she is calling out to him in need.

For the rest of the day, he tries to work on her *kefta*, wanting to keep his mind from wandering, but it doesn't help. His hands are never steady, and he pricks his fingers with the needle more often than the fabric.

*“I'm— the children. It's not safe.”*

The children? His brows furrow together, and he places her garment down delicately before starting to pace again. What could be happening to the children at the orphanage that she's so concerned about? They've never been a major concern to her — at least not in the dreams. Though she mentioned others from time to time, he never thought she was very close to anyone. She always seemed to be on the outskirts.

It didn't help that all the children her own age grew up and left, joining the king's army or trying their luck at marriage and farming or a trade. It wasn't easy for children without families and connections, but presumably most of them made something work. It was only Alina who was able to stay, at least as far as he knew. And she was only there to help keep the place running.

His thoughts swim around him, providing only more unanswered questions without giving any true context to what might be going on. The few puzzle pieces he has been granted don't amount to any sort of picture. There is too much blank space.

Suddenly all the air is sucked from his lungs, and he drops to one knee with the force of it. If he didn't know any better, he would think an invisible foe had just punched him in the gut, but there is something odd about it.

The feeling isn't coming from the outside — not like a wound on his skin would. It's coming from inside. It's that same tugging he's felt between them before, only this time it is making it difficult to breathe. He chokes in as much air as he can manage, but it's all wrong. It's as though he is being crushed at the same time that he is being pulled apart in a hundred directions, each iota of him trying to fly a different direction than the others. The sound he makes is one of a dying animal trying desperately to keep fighting.

And then, without any warning at all, there is nothing. Complete darkness covers over his eyes. His body slumps over, lifeless.

He's never been pulled away from the waking world like this before, but when he opens his eyes, he's no longer in the caves.

In the distance, he can hear screaming.

Looking around though, doing a quick assessment of his surroundings, he can't see *why*.

Despite his confusion, he understands a piece of the puzzle immediately.

*It's so dark.*

He shakes his head in confusion, trying to get his bearings. The sky is covered over, and a thick fog has made it nearly impossible to see what is coming. High above the ground, he can see the signs of thick smoke, though even that is almost unrecognizable against the moonless sky. Something must be on fire.

And through all of it, the screams continue. They come from all around him, making it impossible to know where the threat is meant to be.

For the first time, he considers that the threat perhaps isn't him after all. That she hasn't come face to face with his horrible creation. This, it seems, is something else.

He can't tell if that's better or worse.

Spinning around, he tries to figure out which direction he should move in. She is here — he knows she is. There is no one else who could pull him through space and time. He only wishes she would've done her job a little better so that he might've been brought straight to her side.

There is something certain in him that knows this isn't a dream. It's not that she can't bring him to a nightmare, because certainly she could if she wanted. It's only that he's so intimately familiar with her mind. For all her fears, he isn't sure she would picture this. Nothing about it *feels* like her.

A child starts wailing off to his left, and impulsively he decides to follow the sound. Whatever is happening, she will be with the children. She might not have been able to keep them all together, and perhaps that means she won't be with this child specifically, but he knows she wouldn't abandon them entirely. If he can follow the sound of children, he stands a chance of finding her.

Running without his sight is nearly impossible, and he stumbles most of the way towards the sound, feeling hemmed in by the fog. It's easy to forget that there's a whole world around him when he can only see a few feet ahead of him at any point.

Along the way, he tries to shove aside the darkness, to pull it within himself so that it might not be so thick, but it does not budge. He is a creature of shadows, not fog. It offers him neither allegiance nor obedience.

He finds the child after a few frantic minutes, but he is alone. Pretty and cherubic with light curls and chubby cheeks, he wails. Fat tears roll down his face. He is a frightened child, lost in the oppressive dark.

Aleksander's chest constricts again. This is his own fear realized. The first time he'd met her, alone and afraid, *he* had been this boy.

"Come on," he chokes out, raising a hand out to the child to beacon him forward. "Come on, you can't stay here. You have to—"

The boy continues to cry, not even looking at him. When Aleksander tries to take his hand, it passes right through him.

Of course. This might not be a dream for her, but he still isn't really there. His body is left behind in the caves, and he is nothing more than an illusion. A phantom pretending that he is real.

He can still hear strange noises in the distance, and it doesn't reassure him.

Then, faintly at first but growing brighter, he can see a light. Small and golden — undeniably warm in the maelstrom that surrounds them.

When she appears before them, his heart stutters in his chest. *She's okay. She's alive.*

“Alina,” he whispers, the sound nearing reverence.

She narrows her eyes at him in confusion. He can see the exhaustion haunting her features. The way her eyes never stop moving, looking for every new danger around them. The wisps of hair falling into her eyes that she keeps blowing back in irritation. The sweat that beads on her forehead. The set of her jaw, tired and determined in equal measure.

“You’re here? You’re—” She whispers, looking as though she recognizes him but doesn’t know why. If things weren’t so chaotic around them, he would want to shake her until she remembers, but there is no time. There isn’t even time to consider what it means that she doesn’t quite know him.

“You called to me. But I’m not here. Not really.” It must’ve been a subconscious call to him, but he’s glad some part of her had known to bring him here even if she couldn’t remember why. He wouldn’t want her to be stuck dealing with this alone.

She nods, dazed, before bending over to take the boy’s hand. He notices only then that she has a little gaggle of children trailing her in a line, holding each others’ hands so they don’t lose anyone. The girl closest to Alina holds onto her belt loop so that Alina can retain use of both hands.

“Vanya,” she says, keeping her voice low. Her eyes flick towards Aleksander occasionally, but she tries to focus on Vanya and keep his attention. The boy continues to cry. “Vanya, listen to me very carefully, okay? We’re going to head towards Kribirsk and get help there. It’s going to be alright, see? We’re all together now, so take Olga’s hand and don’t let go.” She wipes away his tears quickly before hustling him to his spot at the end of the line.

When she sees that her ducks are in a row, she continues on, the palm of her hand glowing.

“You remembered how to do it? Outside of the dreams?”

It’s not the most important question at the moment, but it’s still shocking. She’d never been able to summon while awake before.

When she speaks, it’s barely a murmur, and he has to strain to hear it over a dozen little feet trying to move quietly through the unknown. She doesn’t want them to hear her speaking to nothing. “I don’t know how it happened. Earlier today everything was fine. The sky was bright and blue — we almost thought spring might be coming. And then as dusk settled in... It got dark too fast. No moon, the fog, those horrible storm clouds. But it would’ve been fine —”

“What happened? Why are you all out in the dark?”

She purses her lips. “The storm gave the raiders cover. They set the nearest settlement alight. It’s not big — not like the town is — but it’s so close to the orphanage that we knew our only hope was to flee. Everyone started running around in a panic, and then one of them came in through the kitchen. And all the children and staff scattered in a million directions, having no idea where to run.”

“And then you summoned.”

“And then...” She nods, her head bobbing up and down too many times, like she can’t stop now that she’s begun. He reaches out and touches her shoulder, trying to pull her out of her own head. They keep marching forward, following her light. “And then I panicked. And that’s when the light came.”

In spite of it all, a small smile tugs at his lips. “I’m glad it didn’t abandon you.” All those hours of training in the dreams weren’t wasted, at least.

“You— you’re the boy from my dreams, right? You’re the one with the shadows?”

He swallows, the smile dropping away. “Yes. Do you remember?”

“Not very well. Not— not enough.”

He nods, the fist clenched around his heart loosening slightly. Recalling him even a little is better than nothing at all. Even in the dark, even pursued perhaps by raiders, this news warms him. She can summon; she can remember.

She looks from her palm to the inky night surrounding them. “Are you doing this?”

“No. No, Alina, I would never—” Well, not *never*. Not considering what he’s planning to do with *merzost*. “I wouldn’t put you in harm’s way. I can’t.”

“Can you stop it?”

“I can’t do anything to darkness that isn’t my own, especially when the fog is a contributing factor. Only your light can do that.” He doesn’t remind her that he’s an amplifier, but only because it doesn’t seem relevant. If there are still raiders about, they would be making themselves more visible. Better to use the fog to their advantage for as long as they can.

She frowns but doesn’t ask any more of him. “It’s a long walk to town. We have to put as much distance between us and Ipatiev as possible.”

“Ipatiev was the settlement they burned?”

She looks back over her shoulder briefly, though there’s nothing to see there. He can’t even see little Vanya at the end of the line. The fog is far too dense for that.

“Yes. It was.”

“Then let’s keep moving. Try to keep your light as dim as you can so no one spots us, okay?”

The ragtag group of orphans treks on through the churning dark, and he speaks quietly to her the whole time, keeping her on task and as far from despair as they can manage. There won't be time for her to break down until she is safe.

And if this is the only way that he can help her, then he will do it.

He sticks a hand out in front of her, abruptly halting their little train. "I think I hear voices up ahead."

She pauses, listening, before saying, "It sounds like Ravkan."

"Were the raiders not Ravkan?"

She shakes her head. "No. I think they were Fjerdan. It was hard to tell."

"So you think the Ravkans might be other escapees from Ipatiev?"

"They might be able to help us. If we divy up the children, we might stand a chance of getting away quicker."

She's probably right, though something twists inside him. Everything about this night has felt like a nightmare, and he can't bring himself to find optimism so quickly.

It is a dangerous thing, hope.

He goes to tell her to dim her light when the voices get closer.

"Alina!" He whispers harshly.

Too late. "What's that?" comes a loud voice.

"A witch!"

Alina shakes her hand like it's on fire, but if she hasn't mastered how to turn the light on, then it seems she also doesn't quite know how to extinguish it. When the small crowd of people emerge through the haze, he can see the fear on their faces as they look at her.

"Alina— Alina, you have to run."

"No," she gasps, looking at the encroaching group with the panic of a cornered animal. "No, you have to help the children."

"This is *your fault*, witch. Those raiders are here for you."

She shakes her head, watching as about six or seven of the men start coming closer. The few women in the group stay back, but they don't try to stop anything.

"Alina," He says, reaching out to touch her arm so that she can feel that buzz beneath her skin again. Her light had gone out eventually, but it doesn't matter at this point. If there's any hope of getting out of this, she'll need it again. That and more. "You have to use your light."

“I couldn’t have done this,” she says instead, eyes never leaving the men. “I didn’t know I had this ability until tonight. They can’t be targeting me.”

The man in front, with a wiry brown beard and eyes that pierce, glares at her. “They’re always after your kind, Grisha bitch.” He spits at her feet. “Who do you think burned the village? They’re *Driuskelle*.”

“But they couldn’t have known!”

The man sneers at her, and instinctively, Aleksander raises his hand and tries to summon the Cut.

Nothing happens.

“I don’t care. They’ve destroyed our homes. Our livelihoods.” The other men nod around him. “Do you think we’re going to let a heretic follow us out? We’ll never be safe with you around. They’ll target us until they have what they want.”

Aleksander’s grip on her arm tightens. “You have to summon the Cut. I know you don’t remember how, but you’ve done it before. I know you can do it, Alinochka.”

She doesn’t even look at him. “The children. Please, not with— Not with the children here.”

The man gestures behind him, and one of the women, his wife maybe, comes forward. She tries to pry the first girl’s hand away from Alina’s belt, but the girl curls her hand tighter around it.

“No! No, Miss Alina!”

The woman looks up at Alina from her stooped position, her eyes wide and afraid. “Please. We can help them.”

Vanya at the back starts sobbing again, though Aleksander is certain the child doesn’t fully understand what’s going on.

“Alina, *the Cut*. You have to try.”

Alina takes the girl’s hand from her waistband, before squatting down to look her in the eyes. She is one of the taller members of the group, and must be a little older than the rest. “Mila, you have to go with this woman.”

“Miss Alina, you said you’d take us to town.”

Aleksander is a second away from grabbing Alina’s hands in his own and performing the Cut for her. She presses a kiss to little Mila’s cheek.

“I know. But you have to go with them now, okay? You have to make sure the other children stay together.”

Olga, at the back of the line holding Vanya's hand, starts weeping as well. They're going to attract attention if anyone is nearby.

The man snaps. "Ivana. The children."

The woman — Ivana — goes again to tug at Mila's hand, and the little girl looks up at Alina with wide, frightened eyes.

"Go," Alina says, a small smile on her face. "It'll be alright soon."

Mila lets Ivana take her hand, though she looks pained the whole time. The line of children dutifully follows after her, hands still interlocked. Alina watches as they disappear behind the men, almost invisible in the fog.

"Alina, please. You have to at least try the Cut."

Her head shakes minutely. "I don't know what that means."

"It's a—"

He cuts off as the man before her bellows. "Who are you talking to, witch?"

She holds her palms up, but not to do as Aleksander asks. She doesn't remember, and it makes him want to destroy all these men with one quick motion. The first of them would be killed mercifully, their bodies separating into two halves before they even knew what was coming for them.

But the man in the middle he would kill slowly. He would savor killing him to protect what is his.

The crowd gasps as her hands go up, not realizing that it's a surrender rather than an attack.

"Please, I—"

"Kill the witch!" Someone shouts from behind.

The man at the center eyes the others, giving them a nod to advance.

Aleksander tries to stop them, but he can't summon here. He can't do *anything*. When he calls to his shadows, they abandon him.

Her hands twitch, like she's trying to get them to reignite, but nothing happens. She shakes them at the wrist, infused by terror.

"Please, please..."

The first man takes a swing at her, and though she tries to duck out of the way, he still catches the side of her jaw. She stumbles back, clutching at her face.

"Miss Alina!"

The chaos continues, the fog swirling around them like a whirlpool.

“I’m not a threat,” she begs. She balls her hands up into fists, unwilling to go down without a fight, but even she must know that she can’t take on seven men at once.

Aleksander feels the heat of rage overcome him, and instinctively he starts trying to use *merzost*. If the small sciences won’t answer him, then he has to go what he can.

The abomination boils within him, bubbling up to meet his call. When he raises his hands though, nothing happens. The power sits just beneath his skin but will not materialize before them.

Another man hits Alina in the gut, and she doubles over as the air is forced from her body.

“Alina!”

He is useless, and there’s *nothing*—

An older man with a walking stick steps forward, and before Aleksander can even warn her, he swings it at her head.

The crack reverberates through the fog, and the children scream at the sound, but they’re held back by the women. Mila tries to pry herself free so she might run to Alina, but Ivana keeps her in a tight grip, trying to cover her eyes.

Alina crumples to the ground, eyes unfocused as blood drips from her temple.

“Please, I can’t—”

Her words slur a little. When she raises her hands again, this time her fingertips spark. Not enough to use against her attackers, but enough to frighten them.

He kneels beside her, touching her bare skin. If only she can summon her light, maybe she could blind them. “Alina, you have to focus.”

Her eyes slide to him, and she doesn’t try to hide her response this time. “Sasha, I can’t.”

His eyes fill with tears at the sound of his name on her lips. “You have to. Please. Please, Alina. I can’t summon here.”

“Who is Sasha?” Shouts the man with the wiry beard. “Who is the sinner talking to?”

“Kill it!” Someone replies, and Aleksander tries to put his body between the men and her, but the next swing of the heavy walking stick goes right through him. It smashes into her face, breaking her nose. Blood fills her mouth.

His hands flutter over her cheeks, like he might put her back together. Like he might sculpt her features into the right shape again after so many years of looking at her. He’d wanted centuries of kissing those lips, and now they are coated in red.

She reaches up to hold his wrist, keeping his hand against her face. “Don’t leave me. Don’t go. I—”

Her voice cuts out as someone kicks her in the side. Aleksander wants to light that man on fire, but he knows there is nothing he can do, so he keeps his gaze locked on hers.

“I was meant to find you,” he cries, voice trembling. “I was supposed to come find you and take you away.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, stroking her fingers against his skin in a tiny back-and-forth motion.

“Stop it, witch!” Another blow to her side. “There’s! Nobody! There!”

“Please,” he begs again, tears spilling down his face. “Please, Alina. We were supposed to be together. You have to—”

He doesn’t know what he wants to say. *You have to fight. You have to perform the Cut. You have to end this nightmare and tell me that it was all some cruel corner of your imagination that created this.*

But none of that matters, because she can’t focus on anything. She struggles to keep her eyes on his face.

“I don’t want to be alone. Sasha, please. I don’t want to be alone.”

“You are *not* alone,” he bites out, fingers stroking along her hairline. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? It’s going to be fine.”

She laughs through another kick, tears welling up on her lashes. “That’s what I told the children.”

“They’re not going to get away with this. I would do anything for you.”

“Aleksander—”

The stick swings down again with such force that he watches her face cave in from the impact. Then it comes down again, and again, and again.

“Stop!” He screams. “Stop! Stop, stop, stop—”

He is powerless against them, and when the stick is finally pulled away, he sees her face.

Bloody. Broken. Completely caved in from the repeated trauma. Her skull must be broken in a hundred places.

“No! No, Alina!” He clutches her limp hand in his, begging her to come back. Begging for none of this to have been real.

Around him, the children's screams join his. The men wipe the blood off their hands, congratulating each other on ridding themselves of the Grisha girl.

"I will kill you," Aleksander says to them, voice choked and broken. "I will kill every last one of you. I will murder your families before you, slow and painfully. I'll make you watch, make you *participate*. You will land the killing blow and then I'll feed you their flesh until your stomachs burst. I'll—"

His threats cut out, overwhelmed. It isn't real. It *isn't*.

"Leave her here," one of them says. "Maybe the *Driuskelle* will find her and burn the remains. Purify the earth from her dark magic."

As the men walk away, disappearing with the women and children back into the mist, he turns back to her. Her body is sprawled out on the grass before him, twisted and wrong.

"No. This isn't how it was supposed to go," He leans over, picking her up so that he can hold her to his chest. Unthinkingly, he starts to stroke her hair. "You're not gone, because we were supposed to find each other. This isn't right. None of this is right."

He rocks her back and forth, begging her to return to him. His tears start to puddle in her sunken cheeks.

"You're not gone. I won't *let you* be gone."

But her voice never answers him. Light doesn't dance at her fingertips. Her chest remains still.

"I'm going to kill every last one of them. I'm going to hunt them down and make them wish they'd bowed at your feet instead. I'm—" Another sob escapes him, halting his words. "I'm sorry, *solnishka*. I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

He holds her tight, the sound of destruction in the nearby settlement quiet to his uncaring ears. He hopes the Fjerdans leave nothing but ash, if only because the people deserve no remorse. Not after what they'd done.

"My Alina," he whispers against her forehead.

He sings a song he remembers from childhood, the words in a Ravkan dialect so old that even he struggles to understand the meaning. But the sounds are comforting, evoking a memory of his mother singing it to him as a babe.

A tugging feeling starts to claw at him, but he digs his fingers further into her skin. He won't leave her. He won't. He told her he wouldn't leave her alone, and that's the only promise he can still try to keep.

He will hold her until his own body begins to decay here on the ground, until he can join her wherever she's gone. They aren't meant to be apart — not forever. The universe intended for them to be together. He believes that more than anything.

If they can't be together here, then they will be together there.

But the tugging continues despite his cries against it. He hunches over her protectively, but it does no good.

The universe drags him away from her, and he falls through time until he wakes up to the cold of the cave again.

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The first thing he does when he wakes is punch the cave wall until his hand is bleeding and broken.

“We were meant to have forever!” He shouts at nothing. Everything has left him. He has forsaken society, and now the only things that remained with him, his mother and his Alinochka, are both gone. There is no one around to rein him in. “We were meant to rule the world together.”

He keeps hitting the wall, leaving stains behind. His knuckles are reduced to a bloodied pulp, but he can't bring himself to stop.

“I was meant to hold you,” he whispers. “I was meant to love you.”

She had loved him, and he hadn't permitted her to say it. He can't imagine the words in her sweet voice because he had stopped her — had wanted to wait until they were finally together.

If she does not exist in the world for him to find, then there is no more reason for anything. THere is no reason to keep fighting. There is no more reason to keep living, even. She will be born in the future, and she will die before he finds her.

He falls to his knees with a sob, his forehead pressed to the cave's wall. It's the one thing he doesn't understand. If he knows what is going to happen — where it's going to happen, even — then why doesn't he stop it? Why doesn't he whisk her away from everything that pains her?

Is he dead in the future too? Have their stars always been so crossed?

Tears roll down his cheeks unencumbered, and he feels as one drips off his jaw before landing on the crumbled book lying forgotten beneath him.

He'd thrown it in the corner so long ago, collecting dust and debris. Now it looks back at him and mocks his hope.

The urge to burn the stupid thing wells up in his chest. When that half-witted woman in Yovlinsky outside the church tried to hand it to him, he should've torn it in half and thrown

it back in her face. Praying to saints is for the foolish *otkazat'sya* who cannot see that their miracle workers are right in front of them, being hunted for sport.

The need to destroy becomes unbearable, and his hands reach out automatically to rip off the cover. The stupid thing shreds in his hands, and he repeats the motion, trying to let all of his rage out on this stupid *piece of shit* book that doesn't do anything for anyone.

He moves to tear free another page, probably the fourth or fifth by now, when his hands suddenly come to a halt.

The drawing is all wrong — long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. It looks like any number of little girls along the northern border. For all anyone would know, she could be Fjerdan.

But the name at the top catches his attention, and his lungs stop working.

*Sankta Alina of the Darkness*, the hated page reads.

His fury erupts.

How could they know this? How could they *already know*, when it hasn't happened yet?

His heart cracks open as the answer rises to meet the question.

Why he didn't save her, why their timelines have always been so skewed, why her life is no better even with his plans to bring about the age of Grisha. How they already have her in their useless book of saints.

She never lived in the future at all. The church in Kribirsk didn't look new to him because it had just been built, but because, after centuries of decay, it had finally been *rebuilt*.

Time moved so slowly for him because he had far more years to spread things out over. It was never because he was going to have to live whole lifetimes until he found her, but because she was never slated to reach nineteen. Every last dream had to be put to use for her before the end.

She was dead before they ever even met. Dead long before he was born. It was she who was the ghost — his little *malenchki*, haunting him with her light.

He stares down at the page, lip trembling. Sankta Alina of the Darkness. They have never, ever deserved her. Not the honor of knowing her, or loving her, or worshipping her. They have salted the earth with her spilt blood.

Though his eyes weep, his blackened heart is already bending towards revenge. He might not be able to destroy those who killed her, but he will make sure that the world never again utters her name in any way but terrible reverence. They will regret the sins of their ancestors until they too are nothing but ash.

They killed her because they feared what she could do, even if she never raised a hand against them.

He will be sure to give them something worthy of their fear.

## Chapter End Notes

Whew.... I've been holding this secret in for a long time!

A lot of people were really excited in the comments about a future in which he finds her and brings her to the Little Palace — so much so that I almost changed the trajectory of this fic! But ultimately this was always going to be how it happened. They thought she lived in the future, but she actually lived in the past, already dead by the time he was born.

I've been very careful throughout this whole fic never to name her orphanage, anyone there (like Mal or Ana Kuya), or the nearest town, because I didn't want to tip you off that things were different. She doesn't live at Keramzin, but at a place called Ipatiev House (named after the historical Ipatiev House that served as the execution site of Nicholas II and his family). The nearest town is actually Kribirsk, which will be important later.

I hope you enjoyed this update despite the angst. I promise things can only get better from here.

**Comments are so appreciated and I cherish each one!**

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

hey besties! fancy seeing me here again with two updates in the same week!

i had some free time to plug away at this chapter and figured it was kinder not to make you wait. i mean, i can't promise this is any happier than the last one, but at least it can't get worse!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The caves, so close to Yovlinsky, are not far from the border with Fjerdia.

That's where he attacks first.

It's not on the way — in fact, he travels further from Kribirsk in order to stage his attack — but that doesn't matter. He will get to her in time. After all, he is already decades or even centuries late.

Part of him does want to rush. He wants to run to her side and never leave it, letting the moss grow over his body until they're together again.

But more than that, he knows he needs to *rage*. He needs a place to explode, and the Fjerdians are an easy target. They deserve it — his hate, his censure, his chaos.

He doesn't even need to use *merzost*, and the thought of it makes him laugh so hard that he starts to sound manic. They aren't ready for him. They spend all their time and effort training their witch hunters, and yet one man bent on revenge can destroy an entire town in a matter of hours.

He walks through the streets without a care in the world at first, the morning sun just beginning to crest over the horizon. Only the people in trades that require an early start are awake, and the town is not yet busy.

Every time a person reaches out to him, wanting to say hello or to see if he's interested in the finest fish this side of the Onsted River, he lets his shadows out. Sometimes he does so with quickness and precision, allowing the Cut to slit their throats before they even know what is coming for them.

Other times, when he's feeling playful, he sends the darkness to creep up their bodies, racing northward until his shadows can wrap themselves around the victim's neck.

Throttling them feels far more satisfying.

The first two dozen or so people don't even have any warning — each death is spaced out enough from the next that they haven't had the time to realize that Nils around the corner or Magna with his furs are already turning blue.

It's so easy it feels a little embarrassing. This cannot possibly be the great might of Fjerda.

Then someone catches on. She's a woman, thin and frail, clearly no fighter, but she runs to a central post in the square and starts ringing a bell. The clapper in the center swings back and forth with each loud clang.

He might've killed her quickly if only to shut the bell up, but it hardly matters. The town will all be waking now, having heard the alarm and knowing what it means.

So instead he takes his time, letting the Cut open her insides without slicing clean through. Her intestines spill out as she drops to the ground, but her hands keep twitching towards them as though she might manage to put them back in. She writhes for several minutes, and he watches for as long as he can.

Then the men with their pitchforks arrive — first responders who are not as well equipped as the *Drüselle*. He can see that they are holding the standard iron wristlocks that would keep him from summoning, as well as nets and bows and other tools to bring him down.

He doesn't give them a chance.

With a few swipes of his hands, the first row of people is split in twain, falling to the ground with the slippery *thuds* that accompany a successful use of the Cut.

He lets his shadows choke the next row, and through the screams, he can hear people calling out to him. Not in fear, but in hope.

At the center of the square, hidden behind statues erected to Djel, is a cage, and in it are the Grisha set to be burned at high noon.

He's always dreaded this kind of treatment — was always so afraid to accidentally cross over from Tsibeya into Fjerda, putting a foot in the wrong spot and becoming food for the pyre.

The Ravkans are not kind to their Grisha, but at least they seldom tie them to a stake. Grisha there are killed using quicker methods. A sword, and axe, maybe bludgeoned to death if they're unlucky (*like his Alina*, his mind shouts). That is the great and lauded humanity of their Tsars.

He could help the imprisoned Grisha escape, and he will, but there's no rush. More than anything, he wants to remind the Fjerdans that he doesn't *need* the other Grisha to destroy them. He is a weapon all on his own. Finally, finally, he is bent towards what these people have always deserved: destruction.

They have cast him as a villain, and now he is ready to become one.

A child runs out from a nearby building, and Aleksander stays his hand. His heart is intent on revenge, and yet is he no better than every other monster if he kills children who have not

committed sins? Children whose only crime is being born to families that are fed on hate?

He looks into the eyes of the little girl, no different than Mila or Vanya. No different than Alina when she had been only a tiny thing.

And then he slices the girl clean through, his hand waving without hesitation.

The memory of Alina as a child gives him strength. He is doing this for *her*, in her name. The Fjerdans are in part to blame for her death, and they deserve to suffer. All of them — every last one who has ever had a hand in the persecution of the Grisha.

He has no qualms with the children. If he thought he could spirit them away somewhere to see them raised counter to the beliefs of their dead families, then perhaps he would've tried. As it stands, it would only harm his cause to leave behind orphans who will grow vengeful. They will hate the man who did this to them and the Grisha by association.

There is no room in the world for a new generation of terror, so when a boy runs out to follow the dead girl, Aleksander kills him too.

Again, again, again.

Children and the elderly and women round with babes. He does not care. They will all pay for the martyrdom of Sankta Alina. They will bleed as she bled, and they will fear the end as she feared it, tearful and terrified.

Finally, only once the majority of the first wave has been destroyed, he finds the keys on one of the dead bodies and opens the cage. A man steps out first. It is clear that he had once been burly and large, but days or even weeks kept underfed have starved away some of his bulk. There is something haunted in his expression as Aleksander unlocks his hands from behind his back.

“Free the rest,” he says, tossing the keys to him. There are at least ten others in the cage, probably more. Aleksander will need them, but not for this.

He goes back to fight, watching as they all fall before him, one by one with screams of agony.

It is music to his ears. Her cries have echoed in his head every moment since he awoke in the cave, and now he can finally hear something else. A chorus of the dying — of retribution.

An inferni must get free, because suddenly the whole town is alight, buildings catching fire around them faster than he can track.

It's gorgeous.

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“What now?” Asks one of the women as they stare at the ruins of the town before them. “Surely a neighboring village will have already sent riders. The *Driuskelle* might be on their way, even.”

“I have no doubt,” Aleksander replies, kicking away a stray limb on the ground. “They will probably be here in an hour or two. It’s not enough time to flee.”

One of the men, much scrawnier than the others, only coming up to Aleksander’s shoulder, glares at him. “Not enough time? It doesn’t matter — it’s the only option you’ve given us now.”

“Hush,” the same woman says reprovingly.

Aleksander only shrugs, too numb to care. “You could’ve been dead on the pyre. Now you are here. Seems like an improvement to me.”

“You could’ve *snuck us out, mudak!* Now we’re all going to die trying to dodge *Driuskelle* swords!” The man’s words come in a mixture of Ravkan and Fjerdan with a sentence structure that seems to fit neither, but Aleksander can understand him well enough.

“You can run and die. Or you can fight. One of those options gives you a chance.”

Alina will never get a chance. She never had any means to save herself.

He couldn’t help her, and it makes him resent the idea of saving them in her place, but they can prove useful. They are Grisha — they know they need him if they are going to avoid disaster.

“I’ll take my chances with running,” the man spits.

Aleksander looks down at the wad of spittle by his feet before glancing back up. “What’s your name?”

“Jonas.”

Aleksander looks around at the others. Some are wide eyed and frightened, wondering what the scary shadow monster will do next. Some seem almost comforted and bolstered by his presence, believing it truly possible that they might win if only they stay close to him. It’s obvious to him which cowards might be swayed by Jonas.

“Well, Jonas,” he starts walking closer to the man until he has to tilt his head back the whole way just to maintain eye contact, “you can run if you wish. I have no need to protect the lives of mice.” Then he turns to face the group. “But know this: the *Driuskelle* are unforgiving. Whether you appreciate what I’ve done or not, they will see you as complicit in the total devastation of a town. They will show you no mercy, and your deaths will be slow. Slower than burning, and considerably slower than a single, well-aimed sword swipe. You might suffer for hours under their torture if they are feeling bored enough. But if that is what you want, then Jonas can show you the way.”

He grins at the man before prodding him along. “Aren’t you leaving? You don’t want to still be with us when the cavalry arrives — they’ll think you’re actually planning to defend yourself.”

“I—” The man looks out into the forest, face ghost white. Suddenly his bravery leaves him, and Aleksander can’t help but enjoy it. This man should be afraid.

“Go,” he says. “And anyone who agrees can join you. You are no use to me here.”

When Jonas hesitates, Aleksander lets his shadows creep towards him along the ground, biting at his feet until he has to dance in place to keep himself out of their grasp.

Harsher, he repeats himself. “Go.”

Jonas turns tail, running the opposite direction with as much speed as he can muster. The *Drūskelle* won’t spare him, and Aleksander won’t keep him. The only hope he has now is to be very fast and very quiet.

It’s too bad that the prints in the snow will give him away.

“If anyone else has a problem with staying to fight, you know where to express your grievances.” He holds a hand out in the direction Jonas has fled.

“What is your name?” Calls the woman from before, now tending to a younger Grisha boy who is bleeding from an old leg wound. A healer, then. Not much use in a fight, but she’ll be plenty busy in the aftermath. “And what are you? I want to know exactly who I am to fight beside.”

Aleksander. *Sasha*. “Eryk,” he offers. The name he took decades ago, back when he learned two important lessons. The first was that the Grisha needed someone to protect them, even if they themselves wanted to attack and use him. “And I am...”

He pauses, never having considered what he is before. He’s a shadow summoner, of course. That much is obvious. An etherealmik through and through. For the first time, though, he has the chance to become something more. To become the unknown figure that is feared in the night. The loathsome creature who lurks somewhere in the cusp between terror and hope.

“I’m the Darkling.”

*The* darkling, not a darkling. He will keep this mantle for himself. He will rule as the leader of the Grisha, setting himself apart from and above them, until such a time that his punishments have been meted out.

The second thing he learned from his time as Eryk was that the only person he could trust in the world was his *solnishka*.

Now he can trust no one, not even this healer. “And what’s yours?”

She looks at him with calculating eyes as her hands smooth away the boy’s wound. “Luda.”

“Good, Luda. We’re going to need your skills if we’re to make it out of this alive.”

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By midday, they can hear the hordes on the horizon, riding towards them with their wolves underfoot.

He kills the animals first. Wolves, unlike the *otkazat’sya* who cloak themselves in airs and try to pretend they are something more than they seem, are actually dangerous.

By mid afternoon, the town is still smoldering. Dead bodies lie everywhere. A few are Grisha who were brave enough to stay and fight.

Most are *Driuskelle*. Not a single Fjerdan escapes with their life. Not against him — not against this hatred that has exploded inside of him.

“At the risk of sounding repetitive,” Luda says, sidling up next to him as he looks out over the bloodstained snow, “what happens now?”

“You could stay if you want. Or you could run somewhere else — to Ravka or Kerch or Novyi Zem. I’m not sure I’d recommend any of them as being particularly safe, but you’re Grisha. You already know that.”

“And where will you go?” Asks another of the group. She’s younger — only maybe sixteen or seventeen. Aleksander thinks her name is Ilsa. A tidemaker, so she’d played her part in the battle as best she could, dousing the enemy in freezing cold water until their bodies were too numb to fight. It wasn’t the most productive offensive power to have, but it had worked well enough to be of use.

His hand clenches into a fist in his pocket, wishing he had something of Alina’s to hold in his empty palm. Something to ground himself with. “I’m going back to Ravka. To Kribirsk. I have unfinished business there.”

“Doing what?” Calls a man from further away. He’s stooped over the body of a dead *Driuskelle*, checking to see if he has any useful weapons. The others are quick to follow his lead if they haven’t stolen a couple of blades already.

“I’m going for vengeance. I’m going to create a weapon that will protect the Grisha forevermore.”

It’s an honest answer. He’d considered lying, considered sugar coating the truth, but in this case, reality seems the better option. These people are tired. Traumatized, even, from their wait to be executed. They might not be as starved for destruction as he is, but they are still hungry.

“A weapon?” Luda asks warily. “What kind of weapon?”

He turns his head to look at her slowly, eyes tracking their surroundings until they land on her. A distant part of him recognizes that he must look crazy, covered in the blood of his enemies, eyes wild and unhinged, talking of seeking revenge.

And yet when his eyes meet hers, she doesn't look afraid. Considerate, maybe, as though she's still trying to decide if it's worth throwing her lot in with a madman, but not like she wants to stop him.

"The kind of weapon that will ensure the Tsar never overlooks us again. The kind of weapon that will make us valuable — a force to be reckoned with."

If he can expand it at will, then it will make him the single most powerful person on the continent. He can eviscerate borders, end the Shu experiments and the Fjerdan executions, and bring stability to the lives of people who have spent so long in hiding.

And if there's any mercy in this world, doing so will kill him too. It will take his life and bring him where he longs to go.

If it doesn't... if he lives through the creation and must take responsibility for it as he'd always planned to do, then he will rain fire onto the earth. He will make them hate him as much as they hated her. Their worship for her will not be enough, and certainly it won't save them. It comes far too late.

"I want to go with him," declares Ilsa. "I don't want to live in fear anymore."

"It's not that simple," comes the kind voice of another member of the group. They are too numerous to remember them all — only the outliers seem to have made any impression. "It could be dangerous, Ilsa."

"Everything is dangerous!" She waves at the town burning down around them. "He protected us here, and I want to go wherever he's going. If there really could be a weapon to protect us..."

The others look at him, then at Ilsa, and then back at him. It's clear they're unsure what to do, but she's made a good point. He can do for them what they cannot do on their own: offer them mostly safe passage.

"I'm with you," Luda says from beside him. "There's nothing for me here, and now there's nothing for me to return to in Ravka either. The worst that could happen is that I die. I'll take my chances."

Her own death is certainly one of the worst things that could happen, and it's probably more likely than she suspects. He wonders how prepared she is for that eventuality. They might have tried to reconcile with the end when they were caged up and set to burn, but now they have again tasted freedom.

The quiet woman tries to take Ilsa's arm, but she shakes it off. "I'm going. None of you are my parents, and none of you can stop me."

“I’ll come too,” says the man from before. Another two men join him with nods.

In the end, all eleven people in the clearing eventually decide to join. They have seen what happened to those who waffle already. The memory of Jonas, who will have been spared the brunt of any attacking force by Aleksander’s slaughter of the *Drüselle* here, is still fresh in their minds. Just because these fighters are dead does not mean that he will survive alone.

“I will lead you to Kribirsk. And in return, you will help me fight our enemies along the way. I can only fight them off on my own for so long.”

One of the inferni men nods his head. The others fall in line.

“And what of the weapon?” Asks the quiet woman from her place at the back.

Aleksander chooses his words carefully. He could lie to them, but it’s easier to evade the truth — to give them a beautiful thing to hope for that is true enough but misses what are perhaps their deepest concerns. “Grisha are dying out in every country. The persecution is going to wipe us from the earth. If you don’t want that to happen, you will help me to find another way. You will help me to make our cause stronger.”

She nods slowly. There is something worn in her, burdened by all that she’s seen and been through. He knows the feeling.

They set out before the sun begins to sink below the horizon, and they don’t stop again until it’s too dark to see.

Settling on the cold ground, he says, “Luda and I will take first watch. Everyone else will rotate through the night.”

Luda sits next to him, keeping only a small bit of distance between them. For a moment, if he stares ahead and lets his mind go blank, it almost feels like Alina’s small body next to him, warm and exhausted and alive.

Almost.

*You look cold*, she would say. Then, with a laugh, she would add on, *finally a chance to worry over you for once*.

He would deflect. *I don’t worry over you all the time*.

Eye brow raised, she would grin at him. *Oh? I have a long list of examples of that being a lie, but you can try to argue if you want*.

The sun would be bright overhead, and she would take his hand in hers and brush her fingertips over the lines on his palm.

*Smart choice*, she’d laugh when he said nothing. *Let me warm these for you*.

Her hand would brighten, filled with the stars, and then—

And then she would die. She would die alone and afraid, the light refusing to come to her again.

She would die, and he would have no way to *stop it — just fucking make it stop.*

“You can sleep. If you want,” Luda offers. It’s so blasé, so casual, that it pulls him out of his own head for a while. Alina would’ve said those words while his head rested in her lap, hands running through his hair. Or, more likely, *he* would’ve said those words — the same words that he uttered so often.

In Luda’s voice, it’s nothing more than a polite and conventional thing to offer, and that makes it seem strangely meaningless. It reminds him that Alina isn’t the person next to him. Not tonight. Not ever again.

When he says nothing, she tries again. “You look tired. I really don’t mind.”

“No,” he says, voice hoarse. “I’ll keep watch.”

It has been over two days since the vision, and he hasn’t yet slept. He is afraid to see what will happen when he tries.

Is it better to close his eyes and see her for those fleeting moments, knowing that it’s an ordinary dream but too happy to care? Or would it be harder just to lose her over and over again, each night a painful reminder that the day brings him no peace?

And what if she does not appear at all? If his dreams are empty and dark?

It’s hard to imagine surviving that. Not because he is weak, but because she had been his only hope. She was his anchor, and now he is as lost to the waves as Baya in the story.

So he does not sleep, and Luda does not ask again.

Hours later, when she is nodding off in her seat, he sends her to bed, waking up Peter, the *inferni* man, to join him in his watch.

Peter too asks if he would like to rest, and again Aleksander refuses.

When his eyes grow tired, he pulls out her *kefta*.

Beside his own *kefta* he wears and a few rations of food and water, it was the only thing he’d brought with him, packed away in his rucksack. She’s going to need it still. What if it’s cold there? It is his job to protect her.

The moon is dim tonight, but his weary eyes can see enough to get by. Nimble fingers work over the fabric, wanting to get each curl of gold to look perfect. Raiders could be sneaking up on him right now and he’d have no idea, too distracted to care.

Over time, his skin starts to get cold, numbed by the chill of the tundra. He stabs himself more than a few times, cursing under his breath.

Peter looks over at him, finally giving in to his curiosity. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Yes.” He offers no more, hoping the other man will return to his silent watch.

“It matches yours.” He points towards Aleksander’s own, as if he hadn’t been aware of what he’d dressed himself in when he’d fled the caves. “For a lady?”

He hums. “Something like that.”

Blessed silence returns, and Aleksander is careful not to catch Peter’s attention again with mumbled grievances. No matter how clumsy his embroidery becomes, he says nothing.

Her sun rises before his eyes ever close.

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They travel for three days before he is finally forced to sleep.

On the first day, they find Jonas’s body in the snow, clearly ravaged by wolves.

The others are so shaken by the sight of him that they don’t complain when Aleksander pushes them harder than the previous day.

Nor do they complain when he again refuses to sleep.

It’s not until the third day that they finally decide to mutiny. It’s difficult to even be mad about it, if only because it seems so tenderhearted.

He is very skilled at disregarding tenderhearted things — after all, he does not want to be looked after. He does not want to be cared for. There was only one person who could ever truly care for him the way he wants, and she is gone.

But the mutiny is so obviously being done in what they think is his best interest.

Kirsten, the quiet woman who had been so reluctant to join them, is a natural worrier.

He wonders, in an idle kind of way in which the answer doesn’t matter any more than the question itself, if she had lost someone close to her. A parent or sibling, perhaps long enough ago that it left a scar on her. Or, more recently, a child. She seems the kind to want to take care of everyone around her.

The problem is, she is also a very skilled heartrender.

“I don’t want to sleep,” he says, gritting his teeth to try to fight against her power. His heart is slowing to an even tempo, and though his head feels woozy from being awake for so long, he

is starting to relax. “I will kill you if you don’t stop this. I will wake up, and I will kill you. You’ve seen what I can do.” The threat is said dreamily, though he is entirely serious.

Her hands falter, and he can feel his drowsy mind returning to its normal state, but then she bolsters herself. The feeling begins anew.

“You can kill me if you wish,” she says, far too accepting of it for the words to still feel like he can make the threat again with any hope of success. “I know you can. But you’re going to die on your feet otherwise, pacing your way into your grave. If you’re as important as you claim to be, then we need you alive.”

He scowls at her, but Luda and Peter both nod. From beside him, Ilsa says, “It’s okay. I’ll keep watch. Whatever you’re afraid of, we won’t let it happen.”

He sinks down to his knees before tipping over, curling up into a ball on his side. He wants to be with her. He wants to be far from here.

“You can’t stop it,” he whispers, words slurred and uninhibited. “You can’t stop it.”

Ilsa pushes his hair back from his forehead, and he wonders why she bothers. She’s still a child herself. He is now a man grown, for all that his immortality keeps him youthful. The group should be comforting her, not him.

Not that he could offer her any words of comfort, but she seems to find being in his presence enough of a promise for future safety.

“We will watch over you. It will be okay.”

Then she starts to hum. It’s a song that’s unfamiliar to him — probably something of Fjerdan origin.

It puts him to sleep all the same.

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*At first, his sleep is blissfully dark, and the quiet is comforting. He floats, not quite aware of who or what he is, but that’s all the better. It is time away from his grief, and his body is relieved by it even if his mind doesn’t know why.*

*It doesn’t last. No transient tranquility ever blesses him for long.*

*“I don’t want to be alone. Sasha, please. I don’t want to be alone.”*

*He cries out, the sound almost animalistic in its pain. Her voice... to hear her voice again is both a gift and a punishment.*

*She isn't there, she isn't there, she isn't there, she isn't—*

*“Please. Please, you don't have to do this. I don't want it to be like this.”*

*It's too dark. It's too dark and he can't see—*

*Frantic, he searches for her, kneeling on the ground and trying to feel for her hand or her face. If he could just touch her, then maybe she wouldn't be so afraid. Maybe he could protect her this time.*

*The fever pitch of her voice increases, trying desperately to plead her case against the unseen threat. “Please don't do this!”*

*Following the sound of her cries is painful, but he tries to block out her words so that he can focus. He is close, but the totality of the darkness makes it difficult to know exactly where her words are coming from. They echo harshly in his head.*

*His hand hits something, but it's not her — it's not warm, or soft, or filled with the buzz that stretches between them. The thing in his grasp is jagged — broken at the edges like a rock not yet weathered by time.*

*He wants to let the stupid thing go. It's not her, which means it's of no use to him. Against his wishes, his fingers wrap around it.*

*Without warning, a light flares up next to him. A miniature star held in her hand, only a few feet from where he'd been fumbling.*

*“Alina!” He breaths in relief. “My Alina. It's okay. It's going to be okay.”*

*He moves closer to her, scrambling across the grass that seems to be wilting beneath him. If he could only hold her.*

*“Alina. Alina, it's okay. It's going to be okay. I won't let anyone hurt you. Not again.”*

*She looks up at him, eyes shining with the tears he can see rolling down her cheeks. Her feverish expression and the raw terror behind it makes him want to crush her to his body. He wants to hold her until the nightmare ends — until her soul, the half of him that was taken away without cause — is melded into his body so that he might carry her always with him.*

*“Please, Sasha,” she begs him. “Please don't.”*

*“Don't what?” He asks. “I have to stop them. I have to... Any way I can, Alina. I have to protect you.”*

*“Don't.” She shakes her head, distraught. “Don't do this. Please, I—” Her words cut off with a choked breath.*

*He can't understand what she means, and his heart beats unsteadily. This is happening so quickly all over again, and he knows he could get it right this time if only he knew what to do. If only he knew what she wanted.*

*His hand comes up high over his head, and he stares at it in horror for a single second. Alina looks petrified beneath him.*

*And then he brings the jagged rock down with as much force as he can muster, again and again and again, crushing her face in until the blood gets all over his hands and beneath his fingernails. He screams as his hand makes contact, trying to halt the motion in its tracks, but his body is moving without his permission.*

*Again and again and again.*

*At first she cries at the force of the impact, voice still stuttering out broken iterations of, "Please, Sasha."*

*And then the light in her hand goes dim, and the only sound is the wind rushing around them.*

*"No!" He screams, the sound being pulled from him the wails of the dead. He can't do this again, he can't. The rock falls at his side. "No, no please, Alinochka. Come back! You have to—!" His voice cracks. "You have to come back."*

*He can no longer see his hands in front of him, obscured as they are by the return of the dark, but it's impossible to forget how slick they feel.*

*No power comes to remove him from this place, and he bundles her body up against his chest. It makes him feel sick to know that this time it is by his hand that she has been killed, and he has to stop himself from gagging. Still, to not be holding her would feel far worse.*

*"At least take me with you."*

## Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading! comments make my day and will definitely have me writing the next chapter quicker!

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for 1000 kudos! My welcome into the darklina fandom has been so warm and I'm really grateful to be here with all of you!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He wakes with a gasp, his whole system coming alive at once.

The nightmare sits heavily upon him, pressing him down into the earth until it feels like he will never be able to move again. He will never recover. He's killed her.

Taking a deep breath to try to steady his nerves, he casts his eyes over the scene around him, taking in the sight of ten sleeping figures. They curl into themselves to keep warm, though they'd finally cleared the worst of the snow the day before. The ground beneath them is frozen and dead, but it could be worse.

At the other edge of the sleeping bodies, lit only by the moon, is Kirsten. Her eyes are already on him, wide but unafraid. More than anything, she seems curious to know what he will do next.

“I’m going to kill you,” he whispers, clenching his jaw. He can feel the tide of pain, of emotions so raw he hadn’t even thought them possible until now, rising within him. Ready to drown him. Ready to bring him to her. Alina’s blood still feels tacky on his hands, though he knows they will be clean if he looks. “And it’ll be slow.”

She does not flinch. “Then do it.”

His hands flex, eager to call forth the Cut and give her all that she’s asking for. She’s seen him kill, and she knows that he can be as ruthless as required. It’s her lack of fear that stills his hands.

There is no value in killing her like this. Not when she can still be of use to him.

“You won’t use your heartrending on me again. Do you understand?” *I am sparing your life, and you should not take that lightly.*

Peter turns over in his sleep, a little humming sound leaving his lips.

“I make no promises, Eryk,” she says, the lilt of the Fjerdan accent coloring her words, though her Ravkan is remarkably good. “You are still human. Even those who proclaim themselves to be deliverers must give in to sleep.”

“Not. Me.”

She just shakes her head. “Whatever you fear in your dreams cannot touch you here.”

He slumps back down to the ground, trying to keep his voice steady.

“*Don’t.*” Alina’s words are clear as a bell in his mind, desperate. “*Don’t do this. Please, I—*” She weeps as his hand brings the rock down on her temple again and again, until her words are broken and slurred. “*Please, Sasha.*”

What he dreams of cannot touch him here indeed. It’s just that that’s no reassurance.

If he could touch her, perhaps it would not feel as if all is already lost to him.

“Put me to sleep again and I won’t be so merciful next time. I promise you that.”

When he turns his head, he can see that Kirsten is still eyeing him, and he does not hide himself. Whatever horrors she might see in his gaze are something that he is beyond masking now.

Finally, she nods. He can’t decide if she’s agreeing not to use her abilities on him again, or if she is just letting him know that she is aware of the consequences should she try.

“Go to sleep,” he says after a long pause. She is far and away the most unbearable person on this journey, and he’d rather let her disappear into oblivion for a while than keep her up for a guard shift. It’s not as if he’ll be trying to sleep anyway.

She offers no complaint. “Okay.” Turning over in her spot, she lets her eyes flutter closed, the darkness of the early spring night enveloping her.

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The trip to Kribirsk is long, and with every day that passes, he curses himself more and more for bringing company.

He should’ve left them by the Onsted, telling them to follow the river south until the people in the towns started speaking Ravkan. It would hardly offer them protection, but at least the border would keep the bulk of the *driuskelle* off their backs.

As it is, they only slow him down, and aggravate him, and remind him why he’s spent so long eschewing all forms of company. He might not hate the Grisha like he hates the *otkazat’sya* — they are, after all, his people — but their suffering is not his own. They will hold their pains to their chests until they are eighty or ninety at most if they are exceptionally lucky.

He will carry his heartache forever, and they will never comprehend that.

Even he struggles to conceptualize it. He is still in his first lifetime, perhaps the same age as Peter and Kirsten and even a few of the others. Luda can only maybe be five years younger. They are his contemporaries, and yet their lives have an ending. An expiration. If they grow weary of their suffering, they can look forward to its conclusion.

It won't be like that for him, and time will not heal the wound. He can feel, even now, the way his misery is compounding on itself, growing and growing until he will inevitably be consumed.

"I just think that, when this is all over, I'd like to go to Novyi Zem," Ilsa says as she bounces along beside him. Aleksander almost puts his hand on her shoulder just to force her to walk normally, but she'll tire herself out eventually. Each day, she starts out with seemingly endless reserves of energy, and by the time the sun is high in the sky, it's burned off into exhaustion.

Then the next day she seems to forget the way her feet had pained her for the rest of the afternoon, and she is boundless yet again.

He sighs, rubbing at the corners of his eyes.

"Why?" Asks one of the boys. A man, really, but only just. Maybe twenty, though he could still pass for sixteen in a pinch. Aleksander thinks his name is Konrad. More importantly, he knows he's a materialnik. Konrad had taken a timepiece off of one of the dead Fjerdans in the attack, and his hands seem to constantly disassemble and reassemble it without looking. A nervous tick.

"Because of the *possibility*," Ilsa insists, sounding far too charmed. Aleksander tries to tune them both out to little success. "It's so *new*. So *untouched*. I'd like to see the frontiers and ride clear across them."

"Do you know how to ride a horse?" Konrad's eyebrows shoot up.

"Of course not."

Luda looks at her with a laugh. "Are you any good at farming?"

"Farming? No. I grew up in Balakirev as a baker's daughter. Nobody farms in the city."

"Well how do you expect to get by on the frontier if there are no cities yet?"

Ilsa frowns, like she hadn't quite realized how empty the land might be. There are few cities in Novyi Zem, and all of them are along the coast lines. In a few hundred years, they might see the rise of more, but it hasn't reached that point yet. She's right — it's new and untouched, just not in the way that she might enjoy imagining.

"Well, I'd still like to go, even if I don't live there forever."

Aleksander's eyes cut over to her. Her excitement has not been diminished by their logic. "Maybe stick to the continent," he says, voice bored. "My protection can only go so far."

Novyi Zem is not high on my list of priorities at the moment.” It’s too far away to concern himself with, straight across the open sea.

She looks up at him, grinning. “Of course. Maybe when this is over, I’ll just go wherever you go. The Darkling and Ilsa,” she says hand held out before her like she’s picturing the words, “bringing hope to Grishakind.”

He shakes his head, but something about her optimism almost makes him want to laugh. Almost. “Definitely not an option. Go where Kirsten goes. Or Luda. Saints, go with Konrad.” She could probably make the transition from baker’s daughter to some kind of tinkerer’s wife, though he imagines she will be the kind who grows unbearably bored after a time. Life has not yet dulled her spirit.

Maybe it won’t. Maybe she’s just more resilient than the rest.

“I could live in Balakirev,” Konrad says.

Ilsa crosses her arms over her chest. “Well I’m not going back there, obviously.” No one asks what she means, so she continues. “It was my mother who sold me out to the *drüskelle* when they came. They paid her five rubles for the information. That’s how much I was worth to her when she realized that money would be tight this winter.”

Aleksander keeps his eyes on the ground in front of them, not looking at the girl. Part of him wants to tell her to get over it — their lives are all difficult, and she should expect it at this point.

But that’s not what he’s fighting for, and he knows it’s his own sorrow talking. Their lives have always been miserable, but that doesn’t change the fact that each miserable thing is still worth recognizing. Being told that *everyone has it bad* does not diminish anyone’s pain.

They have all lost things. People. And if anyone tried to tell him to get over Alina, he would claw at their throats until they died choking on their own blood. He wouldn’t use a weapon or his shadows, because he wouldn’t need them. His own rage would fuel him. It should be as slow a death as possible.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” he says finally, watching as the others give solemn nods in agreement with his platitude. The words come out flat and empty, but his reserves of empathy are depleted.

“I’m not,” Ilsa replies, suddenly up beat again. It’s odd how quickly she can revert to good cheer. “I’m here now. With you, about to change the world. Better than being stuck at home.”

“I suppose.”

He looks over at her from the corner of his eyes, and she smiles at him. It’s softer than her others. Sometimes he thinks that she is near-manic with how excitable she is. But this smile is warm and gentle, filled with a kind of understanding. She might be young — the youngest of their party by a few years — but she has placed her faith in him.

She was the first to place her faith in him. When everyone else was uncertain, still rattled by Jonas's disbelief, she had rallied to his cause. He hadn't even needed to sway her — she had only wanted to follow someone she truly thought could protect her. Someone who could give her a better life.

It makes the broken parts of him start to curl in on themselves. A new kind of ache flares up in his chest at her hope.

He wasn't supposed to care about them. They are tools to him and little else.

And maybe Konrad is still a tool. And Peter and Jacek, the two inferni. Natalia, the squaller who is far meeker than the rest. Daiyu, the other healer who speaks to Luda in a mixture of Ravkan and Shu while they patch injuries. The whole rest of the group, really... All tools in a grander plan.

Luda and Kirsten give him pause though. They are not as loud and boisterous as Ilsa. They can blend into the background, but he doesn't forget them like he sometimes does the others.

He does not want to care about any of them. It was easier when protecting the Grisha was an abstract idea. The memory of people like Annika had kept him moving forward, and that was safe. A memory of a long-dead girl could not hurt him. Could not disappoint him. She had already done her worst to him out of desperation, and it was because of that night that he swore he would make the world safer for their kind. But Annika has no true power over him. She is only a fragment of a memory, something he can use to motivate himself.

He had thought Alina was a safe place to put his hopes too, and how wrong he had been. There had always been the hope that he would create a better world for her to grow into. He hadn't known he was doomed to fail from the start.

Revenge is supposed to be his new motivator, the thing that keeps his feet moving forward one step after another. Through the cold and the pain and the exhaustion, seeking vengeance will warm him.

But now he has people like Ilsa, full of a tenuous hope. They look to him for a future.

He isn't sure what to do with that.

They continue walking, listening as Ilsa waxes on about all the things she hopes to do once the Grisha are free. *I'll go to the the theatres in the summer and the markets for the Feast Day of Sankt Nikolai. I'll learn to ride a horse and visit Shu Han for the cherry blossoms and*

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Only her own need to breathe ever stops her rambling.

Her expectations are so high, and he tries to remind himself that he had never planned to meet them in the first place.

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He spends over two weeks walking with the group, cursing Jacek every step of the way. He had been the fool who set the stables alight in the Fjerdan town, and by the time anyone noticed — including Ilsa, who could've put the fire out with her tidemaking abilities — it had been too late to save the horses.

Of course, Aleksander might've snuck away in the night to visit a town en route so he could steal one for himself, riding off without the others, but they are like little ducklings now. He isn't sure he wants them following, but he doesn't know what will happen to them if he disappears either.

Not that that should be a deterrent. He'd rather not think of them at all.

A sigh escapes him as he takes another step forward on sore feet. A saner man would've left them all behind. Especially Jacek.

It's only when they finally make it to Adena, just north of Kribirsk, that he allows himself a moment to relax.

They are almost there. He is almost returned to her, ready to create glorious destruction in her name. He will tear the world in two as retribution. The reminder of his goal helps center him.

He sleeps as little as possible the whole way. When he does, dozing even for mere minutes, he always finds himself back in that fog-covered landscape. Sometimes the other men are yelling behind him, urging him to kill the witch faster.

Sometimes it is only them, and her pleas for him to stop become impossible to drown out. The blood rushing through his ears is not enough.

She always looks up at him with an expression so shattered by betrayal. Her memories of him — of growing up with him and kissing him and loving him — return just in time for Aleksander to smash her skull in.

The images keep him awake most nights, and it is only after days of restlessness that Kirsten will glare at him from across their little makeshift camps when he tries to keep himself on a permanent guard rotation.

She never knocks him out again, but only because he will occasionally give in to her withering stares and lie down. He tries not to sleep, and most of the time he even manages it. She doesn't complain.

But the times when he does drift off, he always regrets it.

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*“Sasha,” she says, breathing a sigh of relief. “You’re here.”*

*She lays beside him in the meadow again, her hand pillowing her cheek like she had the night he bid her to sleep in her dream. She had argued with him, claiming it wasn’t possible, but he had persisted, eventually settling down to watch over her slumber. How he wishes she might argue with him again.*

*Only the small strip of grass separates their bodies. His hands itch to reach forward and touch the sleeve of her nightdress, if only to know that she is really there.*

*He wants to cup her cheek in his own palm, to feel the warmth of her skin again instead of the warmth of her spilt blood.*

*His eyes close, and his inhale comes with a stutter. She’s here. She’s here and she’s not crying out for him to stop, to help her.*

*It’s the closest he’s been to peace in weeks.*

*Her free hand reaches out, tracing along his temple.*

*“I’ve missed you,” she whispers. “You’ve been gone a long time.”*

*He nods his head, almost nuzzling into her touch. “I missed you too, solnishka. But you’re the one who has been gone.”*

*She brushes back his hair, grown longer now than he’s used to. There’s a beard growing in as well. In the past, he’d liked to keep a cleaner shave when he could, when he wasn’t running. But now, there is no time to worry about that. He needs to get back to her. He needs to be where she was.*

*“I haven’t gone anywhere.” He squeezes his eyes closed tighter against her words, like he can stop them from breaking his heart again if he only blocks them out better. “I’m right where you left me.”*

*Her thumb traces down the line of his nose before stopping on his lips. Is it wrong to want to kiss her again just one more time? Even if it isn’t real; even if she’s already lost to him?*

*“You’re not.” He steels himself to say these words. It’s bad enough that he had to watch her die, but the idea that he might spend the rest of eternity having to remind her that she’s dead and that he wasn’t enough to save her is unbearable. “You’re not anywhere.”*

*“I’m here, aren’t I? So I must be somewhere.”*

*“You’re in my head. You always were. I’ve always thought only of you. But that doesn’t mean —”*

*“How do you know?” Her voice is soft but firm. “I’m right where you left me,” she says again.*

*He never wanted to leave her anywhere, he wants to say. He would've died there alongside her if he could've. Leaving at all was a twisted act on the universe's part. He'd had no hand in it.*

*He opens his eyes, desperate to see her and to tell her this. If he had been there, he would've protected her. He would've killed those men, killed their wives and their children in front of them first just to drag it out. He would've wiped their existences from the historical record, and no one would've ever known that they were alive to begin with. They would have been shrouded in his darkness eternally. Dead in every conceivable way.*

*Or, at the very least, he would've given her a burial. If he'd been there truly, she wouldn't have been left behind for the druskelle and the vultures.*

*What happened to her body is the one question he never lets himself dwell on. Every time his mind even strays vaguely in that direction, he has the urge to twist something until it screams. To wring the life from another like they did it her.*

*It also makes him want to sleep for a thousand years, drifting in oblivion. It makes him long to not exist at all.*

*He never wants to imagine her body left stiff and battered in that forest, growing cold as the sun rose and the fog cleared.*

*But all these thoughts — these things that he is desperate to unburden himself from — get stuck in his throat when he sees her face.*

*An airy sound, somewhere between a whimper and a gasp, is the only thing that escapes his lips.*

*Though her cheeks are flushed red, her eyes alive and shining, there is something broken in her. Her face is not concave, not like it is in every other dream he's had. But it's not quite right, either. He can see the faint fracture lines like chips in the paint. Like someone has pieced her back together in an effort to make her whole again.*

*Her hand curls around his jaw, tipping it up so that he might look into her eyes. "It's not your fault."*

*He shakes his head, but her grip tightens. "I mean it. It's not."*

*"If I'd just known," he says, pleading with whatever might be listening. He is still bargaining for her, even after all this time. "I could've done something. I could've tried. I would have done anything for you."*

*"You couldn't have."*

*"If I'd just read the fucking book," he says in a huff, frustrated again with himself. He'd had that stupid copy of the *Istorii Sankt'ya* for years before her death, never thinking to read through more than the single page on Sankta Maradi. Her fate had been under his nose the*

whole time, taunting him with knowledge he was too dumb to find. "Then I could've warned you."

*He knows with full certainty that this dream is only a product of his own mind when she doesn't ask what he means. The real Alina had died still believing that she lived hundreds of years after his current timeline. She might've even blamed him for not coming to find her on the night of her death. If she'd really been in the future, he would've known about her death in time to come and save her for real.*

*This version of her does not blink at his words, already aware of the realization that he had come to about the past and the future.*

*"It's not your fault. This was always how it was going to happen. I was already dead before you were ever born. You couldn't change that."*

*He shakes his head, refusing to listen to her. That's not true, that's not—*

*He could've stopped it. He believes that, because otherwise—*

*"What was the point then?" He asks, frustration seeping into his words. "What was the point of any of it?"*

*"Of what?"*

*"Of the dreams? Of you and me? Of purple oceans and light in dark forests and games of tag? What was the reason, if all along you were going to die? If I was never meant to save you?"*

*He must have failed, because why else would any of this have happened? He was meant to save her, he just didn't.*

*"I don't know. Maybe we still needed each other. Maybe there's more for you to do, and you needed to know me before you could succeed."*

*He thinks about his revenge, the merzost that is going to cover the earth in a barren darkness, and he wonders if that's what it was all for. If she was a martyr not for her stupid cult followers but for the Grisha. If her death was meant to be the final nail in the coffin that would set him on this path.*

*He hopes not. This could've been done without her as a sacrifice.*

*Her fingers flutter against his skin again, and she pulls herself forward to place a gentle kiss against his lips. It's quick, only lasting a moment, but he savors the feeling, letting it coil itself around his blackened heart.*

*"Or maybe this isn't the end for us. Maybe I'm meant to live through you." She smiles up at him. "You carry me with you wherever you are."*

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Aleksander wakes feeling more at peace than he has since he first heard her voice calling out in his head for help.

It's not *peaceful*. It's not *good*. But it's as good as it gets, spending time with a version of her that is only a memory. She says the exact right things, the things he needs to hear, and it's enough to patch him back together so that he might survive another day.

The real Alina probably wouldn't be nearly as accommodating as the one who speaks with his voice. She would say the things he needs to hear only if she wanted to say them. Really, she would probably poke fun at him more than anything else.

But the version his mind creates is what is left of her, and if she's a little uncanny, saying words that his brain is trying to convince him are true, then he can't fault her for that.

So it's not real peace, but it's a start. It's something. He feels... okay, waking up. The weight presses down, but not unbearably.

That is, until he listens to the voices around him and actually allows their words to register. Those were the first few decent hours of sleep he's had in a while, and it takes him several moments to catch up.

“It's really pretty.”

“You shouldn't be touching it.”

“I know that. But it's cold out.”

A third voice joins the conversation. Male this time, unlike the other two. “If you weren't cold enough to do it in Fjerda, I don't see why you'd be cold enough now. We're practically in Shu Han.”

“Jacek, we're in central Ravka. We're nowhere near the Shu border.”

“Not the point.”

“Both of you,” says the first voice with a huff. “Honestly. Obviously I hadn't been marching for weeks on end when we left Fjerda. We rarely even get to light a fire anymore.”

“We're trying to be inconspicuous.”

“I know that. But it looks so warm. And nobody's even using it. Maybe he won't mind.”

He hears the tiniest rustling sound beside him, and his eyes fly open, immediately landing on the cause of the noise.

Ilsa.

Ilsa holding Alina's *kefta*. Hands running over the fabric reverently, eyes hungry.

His words are slow and deadly as he watches her, caught red handed. "Put. That. Down."

"I'm sorry," she says, turning frightened eyes on him when she realizes he's awake. It's perhaps the first time since he's met her that she's seemed cowed by anything. Little in life seems to dampen her effervescence, especially now that they are out of Fjerdan hands, but it makes sense that the exception would be him.

After all, whatever kept him in check before is gone, and he would go to war for that *kefta*. She is wise to be afraid.

She drops it on the ground, too skittish to put it back in the bag he'd kept it in along the journey. He rushes towards it immediately, scrambling across the cold earth like some creature of the night. The others are still asleep, and Jacek returns to his spot on the ground with all due haste, desperate not to be in the Darkling's line of fire.

"I'm sorry — I was cold. I should've asked."

"You shouldn't have *touched it*." His hands tremble as he picks it up, fingers grazing the stitching.

He knows it's fine. She'd only likely been holding it for a few minutes at most, and she'd been admiring its beauty, so it's unlikely that she decided to undo all his embroidery in a fit of pique.

But he checks it over anyway. One. Then twice. And then a third time. His hands can't keep still, and he's making a noise that is unnatural even to his own ears.

This is all that he has left of her, a gift she'd never had cause to actually own. It is the only tangible thing that remains to connect them between worlds.

It was made for Alina's warmth, not Ilsa's. She might yet have need of it.

The thought circles through his head, over and over. *She might yet need it. There's still hope. If he can make the kefta, if he can only finish what he started, then maybe there will be someone to give it to when it's complete.*

A tear spills over his eyelids, and he doesn't realize until it's dripping down onto his still-shaking hands.

These are the lies he tells himself to stay sane. To keep moving.

She'll be back. She'll need it. She'll be cold.

He'll keep her warm. It's his job to take care of her.

But she won't be back. She will never wear his gift. He could sew hundreds of *keftas* for her, each more elaborate than the last, and she will never have cause to wear them. There will be a wardrobe that is never opened, never disturbed.

The dust will settle, and only he will be there to clear it away.

A fourth time. A fifth. His hands keep moving, frantic to find whatever Ilsa might've done to the garment. This is his anchor, the tether holding him together, and now he's breaking.

A hand lands on his shoulder, and he hears a shushing noise in his ear. Trying to calm him? It must be. Like a spooked horse, they are trying to rein him back in. They think he is their leader, and he is scaring them with this outburst.

He doesn't care. He doesn't — he can't. But the shushing sound continues, the hand rubbing small, soothing circles into his shoulder.

Is this the first kind touch he's had since they played tag in her dream? Since he'd kissed her and told her of his love? Is this the first gentle gesture since he started leaving every dream with bloodied palms?

“Shh. It's okay. She didn't damage anything.”

He stares down at the gold thread, still shining against the black fabric even in the darkness. “This is mine.”

“I know. She wasn't going to steal it.”

“This is mine,” he repeats. “This is hers.”

He can feel the way eyes meet over his head, questioning looks exchanged where he cannot see them. He doesn't bother to look up, and they must decide it's not the right time to ask.

He hopes they realize it'll never be the right time.

“The design is beautiful,” Kirsten says instead, her hand still moving against his shoulder. “You've been working on it at night?”

He doesn't like that she's babying him, talking him through innocuous conversation to calm him, but his mind is a million miles away. The *kefta* in his hands feels cold, like he's not really touching it. Like he's not really there at all. In his body, in their camp, in this world.

“Yes.”

“Are you planning to add more?” She asks, looking at the whirls of metallic thread running along the two sides of the opening. “It looks nearly done.”

He thinks of how close Adena is to Kribirsk. They'd started out roughly three hundred miles away, and even with all that time, he still hasn't managed to finish it.

He can't give it to her if it's not complete.

“Not soon enough.”

Kirsten removes her hand from his shoulder before tentatively reaching out to run a finger over the detailing.

If she'd worried that he would cut the finger off for even daring, she needn't have. He doesn't have the energy anymore. Every bit of life seems to have been sapped from him like the shadows sap color from the world.

"Would you like help?" She asks. She could have asked why he feels rushed to finish it in the first place, but she allows him the dignity of his secrets. Instead, she offers him her time.

He shakes his head automatically. No, no one should touch Alina's *kefta*.

Alina would like Kirsten though. At least he thinks she would. Kirsten is kinder than the matrons at the orphanage ever seemed in her stories.

"Are you sure?" She wiggles her fingers slightly before him. "I've likely been embroidering longer than you've been alive."

He looks down at the unfinished designs, feeling *sad* suddenly to see them like this. Incomplete. Waiting. Hoping for a resolution that might never come.

It's different than the desolation he deals with constantly. Alina's loss is an ever-expanding hole in his chest, and each thought and memory of her only makes it that much more impossible to overlook.

But the *kefta* just makes him sad. A simple kind of sadness — the sort that sits in his chest with nowhere to go. It's not a stabbing pain, but rather a dull throb. In time, he might be able to look beyond it. But now it hangs over him, somber and grey.

"I want to finish the front," he says finally. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her nod. A little slow, a little reluctant, like he is her wayward child that she only wants better for. She isn't old enough to be his mother — probably not even old enough to really have been embroidering before he was born, as there can only be a few scant years separating them. But he'd known from those first days that she was a natural worrier, and he's made himself an easy target.

He sighs. "But you can work on the sleeves."

She moves to sit beside him, flashing him a smile. Taking a needle and some thread from his bag, she picks up the left sleeve without giving him any room to regret his decision.

"Luda," she says quietly, mindful that the others are still sleeping. "Take Ilsa and go back to bed, the two of you. We can cover the watch shift until morning."

Luda gives her a small nod in return. "Of course. Good night, Eryk. Kirsten."

She takes Ilsa's hand, but Aleksander is too busy threading his needle to notice.

"Sorry, Eryk," comes Ilsa's quiet voice.

He doesn't say anything, but it's better than yelling at her. It's better than killing her. It's starting to feel like his silence is the best gift he can give.

The rage, the desire to hurt and destroy and kill, still bubbles within him, simmering in wait.

But it does not consume him. Even after Kirsten forced him to sleep. Even after Ilsa tried to wear Alina's *kefta*.

He likes them.

It's a startling thing to realize about himself. He who has needed only one person for so long. He hadn't thought himself capable of caring for any others, especially after Alina's death.

It is possible to want them to survive and have better lives without coming to truly care for them.

But it doesn't matter, because he does. He cares. It's too late to go back on it.

The thought plagues him all through the remainder of the night, watching as Kirsten's expert fingers create his own designs in miniature at the cuff of each sleeve.

How is he meant to kill them now?

#### Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'm very excited to be getting to the next chapter as — if I actually fit it all into a single update — it'll be another big reveal à la chapter 7.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

I'm so excited (and nervous!) for this chapter, because it includes the scene that first inspired this whole story. I can't wait for you to read and see where this has always been leading. I've put you through a lot of pain to bring us here!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The walk from Adena to Kribirsk is the easiest leg of their journey. All the big snowbanks are melting away, but the ground is still cold enough that they aren't stuck wading through mud. The sun, still shy in early spring, provides more warmth the further south they travel.

But every step is agony, worse than any he'd taken through Fjerd and northern Ravka. The hate that had fueled him — the anger that has been swelling within him, trying to reach a fever pitch — seems gone now.

Not gone, maybe. Not fully. But its dormant. Silent in his suffering. Where once revenge had driven him forward, now there is only the relentless beating of his shoes on the ground. Now there is only that fathomless ache.

Ilsa has apologized eighteen times along the way, and at each overture, he can only nod and clutch Alina's *kefta* tighter to his chest. He carries it in his arms the whole way, no longer satisfied to keep it in his rucksack. Anyone might steal it from there, but they'll have to wrestle it from his arms if they want it now. They'll have to kill him first.

Kirsten keeps her arm around Ilsa's shoulders, telling her in hushed tones that she should leave him be for a while. The answer doesn't please Ilsa, he knows. Her face is a cross between resigned sadness and impatience. She wants to earn his forgiveness, perhaps, but more than that, she wants to know whether it's possible in the first place. She wants answers.

Kirsten drags her into a conversation with Daiyu, the healer, and Konrad, the materialnik. It's enough to keep her occupied.

After several hours of his own silence, he feels a presence at his side.

"There was a woman?" Luda asks, voice low.

He curses her for bothering, for acting like it's okay to ask questions of him. Perhaps he has been too nice. Perhaps he should've struck greater fear into this group's heart until a part of them wondered if he was friend or foe.

But it's too late now, so he nods.

“Would you like to forget?” Her hand comes up to brush along his bicep before resting itself in the crook of his arm. He has to grit his teeth to keep from strangling her with his shadows. “I can help.”

“No,” he growls, trying to cover brokenness with aggression. He wants her to be afraid of him.

“Even just for an hour — it might be nice to focus on something else.”

He stops, turning to face her in the soft light of the morning. “I said no.” Her hand is still on his *kefta*, and he looks down at it with disgust until she takes the hint and pulls back. “I’m not interested.”

She frowns. Her mouth is pretty and plush, pink lips that must be inviting to the men she meets. They don’t tempt him. They only remind him of the lips he will never feel again. “I wasn’t suggesting that I replace her. Only that you might like a distraction.”

“Good.” He turns again, falling in line behind the others. Peter is at the front, his keen sense of the land helping to lead them to Kribirsk, not far from where he’d grown up. “It would be a mistake to think that you could replace her.”

He speeds up, leaving her behind to go lick her wounds with Kirsten and Ilsa. Peter, at least, has never caused him any trouble, and Aleksander wants a quiet few hours.

Plus, every step is a little closer to the end of this road.

Maybe killing them won’t be so difficult after all.

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After he eats that evening, he finds himself going back on those thoughts. It would be better if they were easy targets, but they’re not.

Luda apologizes for overstepping. Ilsa sits as close to him as she can around the fire, knowing that he might still be angry, but not wanting to be far from the man who she thinks is her savior.

And Kirsten offers to help again with his embroidery.

He almost says no, but then Peter tells the group that they will reach Kribirsk by midafternoon tomorrow.

There is still too much left to finish on Alina’s *kefta*, so he begrudgingly allows Kirsten to work her magic on it once more.

Natalia sings. Daiyu harmonizes. Jacek won't shut up about what they'll see when they get to Kribirsk. It's then, looking around at this mess of people in tattered clothes and wearied spirits that still won't let them give up, that he realizes that he *cares* about them.

It's a horrible thought. He wasn't meant to care what happens to them. That was Baghra's first lesson, from when he wasn't even old enough yet to comprehend its meaning. They will die. They will die, like Alina died, and he will live. To care for them is to consign a part of himself to the grave, a part of himself that he will never get back.

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The next day, as the sun starts to shine high overhead, they see the towers cresting over the horizon.

Two towers, taller than anything else in the surrounding town that is still hidden from them. High in the sky, covered in the bright gold that makes him want to lash out and destroy them. One a circular dome, the other onion shaped.

The Cathedral of Kribirsk. He'd never thought to ask who it was named for.

Ilsa practically jumps at the sight. "Oh, I love churches! I've always wanted to see more of them. The Church of Sankta Anastasia in Balakirev is practically falling down on top of itself, but this one looks almost as good as new." She runs ahead of them, trying to see more than just the towers.

"They repair it every few decades," Peter says. "The priests believe it would be an injustice upon Sankta Alina's name for the domes to not always shine."

Aleksander nearly chokes at the sound of her name, but he forces his feet to keep moving.

"Who is Sankta Alina?" Daiyu asks. She is the only member of their party from Shu Han, but a few of the native Fjerdans seem to be as bewildered.

"She is the sankta of the sun. Sankta Alina of the Darkness. She was martyred by a group of *driuskelle* laying waste to an orphanage. When they tried to attack her and the children she was protecting, her hands lit up like the morning sky, bright and blinding. It wasn't enough to save herself, but she saved the children before the attackers could kill her."

"The *driuskelle*," Aleksander asks, voice venomous. "Is that how they tell it?"

Peter's eyes flick to him, more wary now than a moment ago. "Yes. Is that not how the story goes where you live?"

"Not quite."

“And so she became a saint?” Asks Konrad over Kirsten’s head. “Seems easy enough. Most of us could be saints at this point.”

Aleksander almost snaps at him to bite his tongue. No one here, not even Aleksander himself, should be comparing themselves to Alina. They will not fair favorably if they try.

“But we’ve never seen another sun summoner,” says Luda. It raises her in his esteem again. Or higher than Konrad, at least. “The saints are all special in some way, I guess. Or else their memory is special, at least.”

Ilsa’s voice is harsher than he might’ve expected when she speaks. “The saints are just witches that the *otkazat’sya* can’t stop thinking about. Have you read the *Istorii Sankt’ya*? It’s almost always their fault that the saints die, and yet they go on to venerate them anyway. The exact same people that they just vilified.”

Konrad shrugs. “I’ve never read the *Istorii Sankt’ya*. I’ve never read anything.”

“But you’re—” *a materialnik*, she probably wants to say. Not that he would need instructions on how to create, but it seems almost counterintuitive to Ilsa, a child reared in the city, that he wouldn’t know how to read. Wouldn’t write down his findings like Morozova had, although even he is just a myth to her. “Never mind.”

“If you don’t like the saints, why do you like churches?” Konrad asks.

“I don’t *dislike* the saints. I just think the *otkazat’sya* are hypocrites who make a mockery of us by worshiping the same thing that they destroy.”

“They never call her a sun summoner in the story,” Peter points out. “Just that the sun comes to her in her time of need.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that she was clearly Grisha. Why else would the *driūskelle* be in the story? They know what she is; they just don’t care if she’s Grisha because she’s too dead to be a problem anymore. It’s a pretty story when no one is around to cause any more trouble.”

Aleksander isn’t sure if he wants to beg Ilsa to shut up so that he might patch over the wounds on his heart, or if hearing her say this — if hearing anyone else in the world defending Alina, even tangentially — is the closest he can ever come to retribution.

Killing the *otkazat’sya* and tearing down the church won’t bring her back. Creating a place where darkness breathes, covering the earth in emptiness, might help his need for vengeance, but it won’t heal.

Hearing someone talk about her and remember her in the distant ways that they can when they’re so far removed for her lifetime is all that’s left.

“Well, we’re traveling with a shadow summoner,” Jacek says, pointing to him. “Are we next in line for martyrdom then?”

Luda laughs. “If I’m going to die, it better at least earn me a cool story.”

“We’re not going to die,” Ilsa says, rolling her eyes. “The Darkling will protect us.”

“Oh?” He asks, brow raised.

“Well, aren’t you?”

Her question is asked with no hint of uncertainty. She doesn’t think, on any conceivable level, that he’ll say no. For all that he might be angry with her about the *kefta* — and he’s not, deep in his heart, though she doesn’t know that yet — she believes with her whole being that *he* is safety. That he is the answer to a long-asked question.

“Yes,” he says after a long pause, throat suddenly hoarse. “I’ll protect you.”

He’s already seen the makings of one martyr. He needn’t experience that pain a second time. Not if he can stop it.

The rest of the cathedral comes into full view, and those who have never seen towns of this size stop in awe. Kribirsk below them bustles with life, the business of the day making the whole space feel alive.

“We’ll be there soon,” Peter says. “Another hour maybe. Where in the city are you trying to get, Eryk?”

He stares down at it, eyes never leaving those domes. “The cathedral.”

“That’ll be easy enough. It’s not like we’ll get lost, at least.”

They walk on, frosted grass crunching beneath their shoes. Peter explains in response to someone’s question that the cathedral hadn’t always been for Sankta Alina, though this Aleksander is already uncomfortably aware of. Once upon a time, in the days where she still walked the earth, it had been dedicated to someone else — Sankt Lukin the Logical, Peter thinks — but no one had argued about reconsecrating the church in honor of a local saint. And anyway, as Peter argues, “*He’s the patron saint of politicians, so no one really minded making the switch.*”

Aleksander stops listening, too focused on what’s ahead. On the promises he has made, both to himself and to others.

All this way, they have followed him, asking almost no questions about his claim that he can create a weapon against their enemies. They have crossed half of Ravka, frozen through by the remnants of winter clinging to the air. They have kept watch when he was forced to sleep, and hunted for the food they ate, and helped him to finish his *kefta*, now adorned with perfect golden swirls. They are, he supposes, his companions. Friends, maybe, if he was a more generous man.

Besides Alina and Anika, he has never had cause to call another person *friend*. Now there are nearly a dozen of them.

He’d sworn to Ilsa that he would protect them, and a part of him meant it.

But if he's to create his weapon without losing himself, how can he expect to not use them instead? They were, from the very first, his kindling. They were only ever meant to start the fire before burning up under its power.

Like the bird he'd killed all those days before Alina's death, they were the answer to his hopelessness. With their lives as forfeit, eleven strong, capable Grisha in the prime of their lives, he can unleash chaos.

Their deaths will change the world.

Or they would, anyway, if he was still certain he could go through with it.

The trouble is, he's not. Every day brings him further from that comfortable assurance that he's doing the right thing.

No war is won without casualties. Perhaps these people wouldn't thank him for using their deaths to free the Grisha, but future generations would. Change is made on the backs of the dead.

"I do feel bad for her, though," Ilsa says, more subdued from both her excitement and her anger.

Kirsten glances over at her. "Who? Sankta Alina?"

"Of course. In every story, they talk about how young she was. Only barely older than I am." She shakes her head, eyes staring off into the distance. "She must've been so afraid."

Quietly, so that they might only imagine that he'd spoke at all, he says, "She was."

But Ilsa looks at him, and there's something too astute there. It would be better for everyone if she saw through him less.

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"The Sankta's blessings upon you," says the priest. Their group enters the church looking like a band of ruffians, faces streaked with dirt and eyes half-wild from everything that's happened since Fjerda. "Long may her light shine in the darkness."

Peter says, "Amen," while dipping his hand in the holy water near the door. The rest of them only watch, making no move to follow.

Jacek, born and raised in Fjerda, looks down at the font in confusion. "Djel's water? What is that doing in here?"

The priest glares at him, a stoniness falling over his once-welcoming features. When he responds, his voice isn't outright *rude*, but there's an air of irritation in it. "It's not *djel's*

water, child. It's the sankta's, harvested from the spot along the Sokol River where she died."

"She didn't die near the Sokol," Aleksander whispers.

"Excuse me?"

Voice louder, he says again, "She didn't die near the Sokol. She wasn't anywhere close to a river."

"Young man, all the sacred texts—"

He stops listening, eye locked on the stone tomb sitting at the front of the room. A skylight sits above, letting in the diffused light of the cloudy day.

The light falls upon her face, carved into the stone as an effigy atop the sarcophagus.

The sarcophagus itself is ostentatious, gilded with bright golds and burnished red from the marble used. Her likeness on top, though, is simple. The same grayish stone that one might see anywhere, carved lovingly to form the slope of her nose and each delicate finger.

It's the first depiction of her that he's seen where she still looks like herself. Her cheeks, her brows, her lips... they are undeniably *her*. Even her eyes, though closed in repose, don't look like they hide the ridiculous blue from the drawings. She is herself.

He reaches out a shaking hand, afraid to touch her. Afraid that somehow, even like this, even encased in stone, she will slip away from him.

There are cracks in her face, lines of imperfection that remind him of those terrible moments of watching as the club rained down on her face, smashing it inward. Here, though, instead of letting those cracks grow and fester, weathered deeper by time, someone has filled them in with a brilliant gold.

His fingers trace over the lines without making contact. *It will be cold*, he thinks. Her cheeks were never cold in life.

Against his better judgment, he lets his hand cup her cheek, the stone unyielding beneath him. His thumb runs over the apple again and again.

She has existed for weeks now only in his memories and dreams. He has seen her die a hundred deaths, each more gruesome than the last. She has cracked under his hands, the light fading from her only once he's finished the job.

It's not better like this. It's not. The effigy gives him nothing — it is her, but it isn't.

But it's better than the dreams. It's better than the fear. He would die beside this tomb, make a home within it as well.

"Who brought her body here?"

He does not bother to look at the priest for a response. "You shouldn't touch her shrine!"

He clenches his jaw, shadows darkening the gaps between his fingers. “Who brought her body here?”

“One of the children came back for it,” Peter says when the priest stays silent. The others in his group watch him with careful eyes. They are not afraid of him, perhaps, but they have seen him fall apart before. They recognize that they sit at a precipice. “At least so goes the story. One of the older girls. She dragged it to Kribirsk and screamed until someone came to help her.”

*Mila.* It must have been Mila, the girl at the front who had clung to Alina’s hand until she had been forced away to protect the others. She came back for Alina’s frozen body and *dragged*—

A tear spills over onto his cheek. “And the effigy?” It looks too good, too correct, to have been artist interpretation. This person knew her.

“At the bottom,” Ilsa says, pointing, “it’s carved with a name. Ivan Alinovich. See? There — along the base.”

He doesn’t bother to look. *Ivan Alinovich.* Little Vanya, the boy he’d found crying in the fog. He’d remembered her all those years. He’d become an expert stone sculptor somewhere along the way, until eventually he could mold her face using only a hammer and chisel.

A boy without a name, without a family. But he’d taken Alina’s as his matronymic.

He leans forward, pressing his lips to her forehead.

“If you want to be blessed by the Sankta, you’re supposed to rub the sun on the side of the tomb like everybody else! Or pray to the icon!” He points to a painting on the wall, which somehow manages to look nothing like Alina, even though they have her likeness sitting not ten feet away. “Only the priests can touch the shrine! You can’t just—!”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get. Out.” One of her hands is balled up in a fist on her stomach. The other lays flat over her heart. He isn’t sure what message Vanya had been trying to send, but she doesn’t look peaceful. Not fully. She isn’t asleep — there’s too much tension in her for that.

“But—”

“Get out! Get the fuck out!” He turns, lashing out at the priest with his shadows. They fly in every direction, as chaotic as he feels. “You don’t deserve her! Get out!”

“Guards!”

He slices the priest in half before he can utter another sound.

“You don’t deserve her forgiveness.”

The sound of footsteps echoes down the nave. Aleksander's hands come up to his chest, ready to summon the Cut at a moment's notice.

"You're going to get us all killed, Darkling," Kirsten mutters from beside him, but she doesn't look angry. Resigned, maybe, but not surprised.

"We beat a whole town and a pack of *drūskelle*. Do you really think the church guard is going to beat us?"

Jacek and Peter face opposite directions, ready to throw fire at any target that might pop up. Natalia raises a hand, and a ball of wind swirls atop it. Ilsa looks ready to flood the place if Aleksander orders it.

"Just try to be discrete, all of you." Kirsten sighs, eyes following the sounds coming towards them. She will stop their hearts before anyone else's gifts are necessary. "We don't need the whole city descending on the cathedral when this is done."

"You don't think we could defeat a whole city?" Ilsa laughs.

"I'd rather not find out."

The guards appear from around a corner, popping out of a side chapel. There are only five of them, and Aleksander isn't sure if he should laugh or weep at how easy they have made this. Whatever sanity he's clung to for this long, shredded and strained as it is, seems to be deserting him now.

Kirsten takes down one on the left.

The other four he fells without remorse. The others don't even need to raise their hands.

"That was easy," Luda remarks, looking at the dead bodies littering the ground.

His hand is still extended before him, the tingling sensation of the Cut not having yet left. He drags in a weary breath, stumbling back against the base of Alina's shrine.

"You knew her?" Ilsa asks, stepping close so that she can look at Alina's face. For a split second, she reaches out to touch the gold cracks on her cheeks before pulling back. A glance in his direction, gauging his response, makes it clear that she fears upsetting him again.

"Yes."

"How?"

His hand comes to rest on Alina's balled up fist, wishing he could will away that tension. Even now, he can still feel her fear.

"Come on," Kirsten says, taking Ilsa's hand. She tips her chin towards the others. "Let's leave him for a moment."

She leads them back down the center aisle. No one bothers to clear away the bodies, but they do bar the doors at the front so that no one pops in and inadvertently discovers what has happened here.

When all is silent again, he stares down at her.

“I’ve missed you so much, *solnishka*.” His voice wavers. He drops his forehead to hers, trying to feel her beneath the stone. “You weren’t supposed to die first. You weren’t supposed to leave me here.” All that he’d done to try to make the world better for her, and she was already hundreds of years dead. The lost memories, the bird, these Grisha. He’s always been willing to sacrifice for her, but to what end? What is left of her? “I’m not good like you are.” A tear drips down onto the vein of gold. Then another falls beside it, darkening the stone. “I’m not. You were always the kind one. How will I know what to do without you there to order me about?”

His eyes squeeze shut, trying to will her into being beneath him. It was never supposed to be this way — it *wasn’t*. He is sure of that. Surer than he’s ever been of anything else. The universe bound them to each other, and they weren’t meant to be separated by death. By time, by distance, by heartbreak — sure. But not death. Never that.

That deep bit of despair reopens in his chest, an injury that never heals. He gets lost in it like Baya was in the storm that almost swept her away from her lover. He knows that pain now, that impossible love that burns until there is nothing left for the fire to consume. He lets it swallow him, deeper and deeper.

*Alina*, his heart cries. *Don’t leave me here*.

His hand grips hers tightly. Deeper and deeper and deeper, falling into the endless cavern.

The tether between them feels like an anchor — dead weight that is going to drown him under the weight of his own remorse.

*Come back*, he orders. His knees buckle beneath him, and his forehead slides to her temple as he falls. *Come back, come back, come back*.

His heart shatters into brittle shards, but he ignores it. *Merzost* sits poised and ready, just beneath his skin, waiting to be called upon to tear all of this down, but he ignores that, too.

Instead, he tugs on the tether, though it feels like trying to hold lightning in his hands. Tugging, tugging, and commanding her to return.

There is something on the other end. The bond is not frayed and broken, lax with loss. Whatever she has become, whatever form she has taken now, it rests on that other side. It waits for him.

He had come here to say his goodbyes, and then the plunge the world into the same darkness that she had tried in vain to fight against. He had come here to punish those who killed her, even centuries later. Their descendants are guilty of the crimes of their fathers.

But now, there is something more. Something else. He will have her, no matter what it takes. He will carry her bones across the world if he must.

“Come back,” he whispers into the static air. “Come back!”

Sweat beads on his face as he pulls, scraping his soul raw as he tries to lift her out of the darkness that envelops her.

She belongs in the light. She always has.

Shadows bleed from his veins and circle her reposing figure. They look almost like chains doing their part to hoist her up.

“Come back! I’m not *done with you!*” He raises his fist, slamming it down on the center of her chest. His bones won’t thank him for it, but he doesn’t care. For the first time since everything happened, he’s *angry*. He isn’t done with her. He will never be done with her. The world cannot take her from him, and she cannot leave.

“You don’t get to die! You don’t get to leave me here.” His fist slams down again. “Come back before I drag you back. You’re mine, Alinochka. *Mine.*”

A crack forms in her chest, and a whimper escapes him.

Then, before he can even consider the damage he’s done, a beam of light shines out from the crevice.

“Alina?”

He scrambles again to his feet, tugging harder on the tether. *I want her back. She is mine. You can’t take her from me.*

Another crack springs up from the rock, and the beam of light shoots up with such ferocity that it shatters a hole in the skylight above. Glass falls down around him like snowflakes.

“I will have her.”

He’d told her once that he was not a very forgiving captor, and he knows now that it was true. She had given a part of her heart to him, and he would sooner cover the earth in shadows until the life is choked out of every last person rather than let that piece go now.

He draws her towards him, closer and closer. A power wells up inside him, desperate for that thing he’s only dreamed of: her, and her light, in his presence. Her power acting opposite his own.

“I’m ordering you to come back!”

Her bones are in that tomb, the skin and sinew having rotted away long before. She is there — what remains of her. He forces her to the surface, arcs of her light racing through him.

Her face cracks, then cracks again. More light, more pain, more blinding, aching desperation.

That same feeling that he'd had fighting the Fjerdans rises up in him, and he holds onto it like a lifeline. Through his despair, those moments of destruction had given him a purpose. Hope, even. The memory alone is enough to rejuvenate him.

“I will kill every last one of them before I let you leave me.”

One last tug on the tether has the rock splitting down the center, crumbling away.

Beneath it, there is a cheek. An eye. Two plush lips, partially obscured by debris. He brushes it away carefully, hands numb. Is she—?

She can't be.

It can't really work like this. She can't be here.

More cracks form down her arms, her torso. Two bare feet, pale after so long away from the sun, poke up from the bottom of the plinth. He wants to warm them between his hands, but he can't look away from her eyes.

Is he hallucinating this? Has he finally lost all sense?

If he has, he's not sure he cares. What does it matter if he's crazy as long as it gives him the one thing he'd do anything for? Being in his right mind has only caused him greater grief.

Her chest rises with a shallow breath, first one and then another. He draws in a ragged breath of his own at the sight.

“Please, Alina.”

Alina's eyelids move rapidly as if trapped in a bad dream. Overcome by caution, he reaches out to put his hand on the side of her neck, trying to infuse her with his own warmth.

“Alina?”

She sits bolt upright, letting out a cry. Her hands curl around the edges of the tomb beneath her. Each knuckle is white with tension.

Running down her face like the cracks in the stone are the same golden scars. One goes through her eyebrow down to the cheek below, only missing her eye by some divine grace.

His lips tremble, and with a sob, he asks, “Alina?”

Her eyes dart back and forth, terrified. “I don't—I'm not—”

She's shaking, dressed only in a light shift. Instinctively, he finds her *kefta*, long since fallen to the floor in his efforts to resurrect her. He drapes it around her shoulders, though she shies away from his touch.

She watches him, dazed and bewildered. Then—

“I’ve... Your *face*.” She sounds almost disgusted.

He touches his cheek, covered over in the makings of a beard. “My face?”

“Yes, your— your *face*,” she repeats, voice hoarse. “I’ve seen it.”

Then she slumps down again, head only saved from cracking into the stone by his quick reaction.

He cradles her face, openly weeping.

## Chapter End Notes

Alina's scars (both on the stone carving and her actual face) are inspired entirely by kintsugi, which is the practice by which damaged pottery can be mended with gold, creating beautiful veins of color. If you go back to chapter one, you'll see that kintsugi is even featured on this story's moodboard!

(Yes I know that this is not how patronymics work, but give little baby Vanya a break).

Thanks for reading! More fun next time, because you know all that resurrecting wasn't too quiet.

I lovingly hoard comments like a dragon hoards gold. Please drop one if you enjoyed :)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Literally do not perceive me as I up the chapter count YET AGAIN.

A lot of you were very stressed after the last chapter, but apparently I'm a lot nicer than your imaginations at this point. Pre-emptive your welcome for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Her eyes don't open again, not even as he whispers her name over and over, begging her to look at him.

But her body is warm and her heart beats, and though his fingers tremble as they run through her hair, brushing it out of her face, it is real. She is real, breathing before him. He hopes that is enough.

Warm. A heartbeat. Words uttered between them, no matter how confusing and disheartening they had been. This is all more than he'd ever thought to get from her again, at least in this life.

There is nothing else to do but to wait and be grateful.

She doesn't lie completely still, and at first, he is grateful for that, too. Her fingers twitch, restless. Her breathing stutters before evening out again. Her eyes shift beneath her lids, as though she's fallen directly into a dream.

She isn't dead, even as she rests atop her own tomb. He likes these reminders. Like her heartbeat, like her warmth, they ground him. He lets her dancing fingers graze his palm so that he might not forget.

Then she starts screaming.

“Alina!” He cups her cheek, trying to wake her. To revive her again, as he'd only just done. This is his job, isn't it? He's pulled her back from oblivion once; he can do it again. As many times as it takes, if necessary. He will follow in her wake like an ever-devoted acolyte so that she will never die. Will never leave him. So that they may never place her once more under the confines of a stone slab.

Behind her eyelids, a bright light begins to shine. Cold, clinical, white. Not the buttery golden color that he is used to. This is pain turned into raw power.

She thrashes against his hold. Screaming, screaming. The sound pierces his ears, bringing him back to that night. To his horrid dreams, holding her down and killing her with his own

hands. But if he doesn't keep her steady, she will roll right off the tabletop and hit the floor.

Her shouts turn into animalistic moans, the kind that you only ever hear from a dying creature who is frightened of what must now come. It is the kind of sound you make when you know you are trapped with no escape. They resonate in the back of her throat, and helplessly, he shakes her shoulders. "Alina, please. You're okay."

Ilsa and Peter pop out from one of the transepts, running towards him.

"What's wrong with her?" Ilsa asks hurriedly, ignoring entirely that he's conjured someone who was not here a moment ago.

Peter's eyes go wide as dinner plates. He stares at the rubble on the floor, the stone that has chipped off of her skin. "Sankta Alina?"

Ilsa shoulder checks him. "Not now, Peter." She turns to Aleksander. "You have to stop her from screaming."

"Why?" He asks, harried by all that is happening. In his hands is the most precious thing, and yet she is stuck in a realm of her own making, plagued by her dreams.

He can guess what it must be that she sees.

"Because we don't think we're—" a crash sounds out, and they all turn towards a hidden door in the chancel behind them. A man in brown robes stands there, an ornate cup on the floor at his feet. "—alone."

The priest looks towards the bodies still littering the floor. Five guards and one of his fellow men of the cloth. This man must've been deep in prayer — or else perhaps deep enough in something else — that the sounds earlier did not rouse him.

His eyes dart to the tomb, and a mixture of horror and wonder fills him.

"That was... that was *solid* alabaster."

He stares at the girl lying where once there had been an effigy. More than likely, he's spent his whole life praying to it. No one would've expected a saint to answer in quite this way.

"Sankta." He draws the back of his thumb in a circle over his chest, a mark to ward off evil. Reverence sits thick the word.

Aleksander holds his hand up, ready to cut straight through the man if he comes any closer, but Peter grabs his wrist and pulls it back.

"Let me go," he says, voice filled with a quiet hate. "Nobody touches her. Least of all the priest."

"This is a miracle," Peter reminds him. "Let the Father see."

Cold anger fills Aleksander's chest, but he withholds from using the Cut only just. Still, shadows lick down his arm and coat the floor, circling like an eddy around the base of the tomb.

"It was *solid* alabaster, the effigy," the priest repeats. "How did she...?"

He bends over, picking up a piece of the rock from the whirlwind of shadows. Then a second, and a third. None of them are bulky — just an exoskeleton of stone. The pieces create a mold of her face, as though she had always been lying just beneath them.

"The bones? In the tomb?" Ilsa offers. "Maybe she... I don't know. Maybe she found her way back? Woke herself up?"

The priest shakes his head. "The tomb was empty."

"*Empty?*" Aleksander asks, staring at the marble box. He had thought that her bones were trapped in there — alone and in the dark. "Where is she? What about Mila?"

The priest's eyes flick back to Alina's sleeping face. She has ceased her screams, but whimpers still escape her lips between heavy breaths.

"Her body was here once. Brought to Kribirsk by the little girl. But then..." He reaches out, brushing his fingers along the lip of the tomb's top. Aleksander makes a sound in warning. The priest's hand draws back. "The city was attacked, a hundred and thirty years back or so. Ravkan raiders from the border territories, who held no lost love for their saints. They took her body. Sold it to the Shu for experimentation."

"Sold her," Aleksander says, rage climbing steadily through his chest and up into his throat. "To the Shu."

The priest, abashed, gives a nod. "Yes. They were not followers of the faith. Not good and loyal Ravkans."

"But Ravkans all the same. Again. Her own people betraying her a second time."

The priest looks at him, but Aleksander does not explain. None of them deserves her true story. None of them deserves anything. Not even to be here, in her presence once more.

The light shines brighter behind her lids, almost blinding in its intensity.

"The church led attempts to retrieve her — parish armies were a stronger force in those days. But nothing ever came of it. Whatever the Shu wanted it for, it must be long gone now. Their experiments never leave anything behind, even bone."

"So you've been lying," Peter says, sounding almost betrayed. "About her body. About the relics here in the church. She's been gone for a long time."

"It was kept quiet, for the protection of the church and its people. Even the army who went after her didn't know exactly what their mission in Shu Han was. They only knew that

something important had been stolen from the church. That was enough in those days, for the faithful to believe in their cause.”

Peter shakes his head, angry at all the wrong things. “People have made pilgrimages here to pray to the sankta’s remains.”

The priest never tears his gaze away from Alina, though he has to shield his eyes against her light. “We couldn’t tell anyone. She was in our care.” Reverence overcomes him. “And what does it matter, for surely she was blessing our cathedral all this time. She is returned to us. The Sankta of the Darkness has come once more to restore the light. To bring salvation to her people.”

Alina cries out again, fighting against that thing that only she can see. Aleksander twists his wrist from out of Peter’s grip, moving to take her hand.

“Are you sure about that?” He asks the priest, warring between sarcasm and outright hate. He has killed already today, and he will be more than happy to kill again. Still, there is more he wants to know.

“Why else would she have come? Alina the Twice Born, whose light will guide us once more.”

“You put too much faith in your stories, Father.” The title comes out with little of the respect that the man probably thinks he is owed. The man only blinks back at Aleksander, too awed still to give the mockery his attention. “She didn’t die for you. She didn’t die for any of you. She died for the sin of being born Grisha.” He tightens his grip on her hand, watching as Alina seems to settle. “And she didn’t return for you, either.”

The priest makes that circle gesture over his heart again, like he is calling her light, the sun itself, to him. “Sankta.”

Against Aleksander’s wishes, the priest reaches out again, his hand coming to rest on Alina’s arm. His touch is gentle, delicate, like he’s worried she might turn to dust in front of him. “Sankta.”

Before Aleksander can push him back, the foreign touch unwelcome on his Alina’s skin, another cry rings out, echoing through the hollow space. Alina’s eyes flash open, panic evident as she looks up at the man bent over her in hopeful supplication.

“You are returned to us, Sankta. We have prayed for this day—”

Alina drags in a breath, her hand tense in Aleksander’s own. Then, too quick for anyone to say anything else, her free hand shoots up, harsh light leaving her palm. He thinks, at first, that it is the Cut. That she will fell the man in one quick gesture right through the throat.

It is not.

Instead, she reaches up, the priest still bent over her prone body. He leans in closer, desperate to be blessed by her warmth.

That's when the screaming starts back up.

This time, at least, it is not hers. Aleksander considers that an improvement.

Her fingers dig into the priest's cheeks, tiny hand covering as much of his face as possible. The smell of burning skin becomes immediately obvious as he chars and melts away beneath her touch. He thrashes, trying to pull back, but Alina only sits up, taking her other hand from Aleksander's where it had only held a faint warmth. It rises to cradle the back of the priest's head, and soon that too is sinking in, the edges of his scalp blistering an ugly red.

She moves her thumb, wiping away a trail of blood leaking out from his eye. Where the digit had once been, there is a perfect imprint seared down to the bone. Then her hands flash brighter, whiter, and they start melting through that, too.

His screams go silent.

She drops his body to the ground, letting it fall into a heap at the base of her tomb. Peter's face is slack. Ilsa just looks on with a vague curiosity.

"You killed him," Peter whispers.

Alina reaches out, and this time Aleksander can see the formation of the Cut, honed from all those dreams of splitting whatever it is he threw up in the air until eventually the pieces came down in two perfect halves.

"No," he says, grabbing her wrist. She turns her glare on him, eyes filled with that wild, untamed fear.

Ilsa pulls Peter back. "Come on."

"But she killed him."

"And we killed them," she reminds him, pointing to the others.

Alina only stares at Aleksander, paying them no mind. Her chest rises and falls with haggard breaths.

"Tell Kirsten to come," Aleksander tells Ilsa, not breaking eye contact with Alina. "Alone."

There is nothing he can do with a tidemaker and an inferni, but a heartrender might yet have her uses.

"Alina," he whispers as the two others retreat. "Alina, what do you remember?"

"I—" She swallows, voice wavering. "Alina?" She pauses, thinking, before shaking her head like the question is inconsequential. The memories of her nightmare cloud over her eyes. "Night. Darkness." She doesn't blink, but she isn't seeing him, either. The day she is looking upon is hundreds of years past. "Pain. So much pain."

Her hand comes up, tracing her face like she can't quite believe it's there. She finds one of the gold scars, following it up to where it crosses through her brow. Her fingers shake the whole time.

Moving slowly enough to make obvious what he is doing, he reaches up, pulling her hand away so that he might squeeze it between his own. "What else?"

"Men. In a circle. Screams. Children. They were — children's screams. In the dark." Her eyes flick back and forth, scanning the room for the same threat that must loop endlessly in her head. "A face."

"My face?" He whispers.

"Yes. I — I don't know. I've seen it. I'm not sure why."

A strand of dark hair hangs down over her forehead, and he pushes it back, tucking it behind her ear. His thumb follows the rounded curve.

"I don't remember why," she says again, sounding more panicked this time. Because of her lack of memories or because of him, he isn't sure.

Kirsten appears, seating herself quietly in one of the front pews. She doesn't say anything, but he can see her concentration as she slows Alina's heart, allowing her breathing to even out. The tension in Alina's body lessens, sapped away under Kirsten's influence.

He tries a second time. "My face. What do you remember?"

"Darkness," she repeats. Anguish rises within him. There is only that night, recalled in flashes. Bursts of terror interspersed by a blank nothingness. "And... and purple."

"Purple?"

She squints, trying to hone in on the memory. "The water. It was... purple."

"You remember that?"

"There were seashells," she says instead of answering. She has rivulets of the priest's blood drying on her forearms. "And..." Her hand comes out, miming the Cut like she had that night on the beach in her dream when he'd made her practice with those same shells. Whether she means to or not, the Cut springs forth from her hand, slashing through the open space until it hits the wall, carving into it a deep groove. Debris clatters down to the floor, echoing.

"Do you trust me, Alinochka?" She had not shied away when he touched her, and an unreasonable hope builds in his chest.

Her head shakes back and forth, but there's something so lost in her eyes that he tries not to take it as an insult. The fist around his heart tightens, but he forces himself to retain hope. She is returned to him; there must be a reason. There must be a better ending for them somewhere.

“I don’t know,” she answers after a long pause.

He cups her jaw, holding her beloved, broken face so that the light shines on it just right. “But do you distrust me?”

She stares up at him through widened eyes, lips parted. They are so close that he might kiss her.

Again, she shakes her head. The movement is small and controlled in his hand. She is wearing that white shift, looking every bit like the girl from his dreams in her pretty nightgowns. “No. No, I don’t think so.”

His lips press to her forehead, holding her there against him for several seconds so that he might breathe her in. “Then that is enough for now.”

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Kirsten helps him put Alina to sleep. Despite her centuries of rest, there are shadows beneath her eyes, and he breathes a little easier when she slumps against him. He tightens the *kefta* around her shoulders. It is the only comfort he can offer her for now.

“What do the others know?” He asks.

Kirsten shrugs. “All of it, I assume. I doubt Peter and Ilsa kept quiet when they returned. They will know that you have risen the dead, and they will know that she is terrified and dangerous.”

“No one touches her,” he growls. She is not dangerous, at least not any more than she has a right to be. If she wants to destroy the world, he will not stop her. More than that, he will fight anyone who tries to stop her.

“No one will,” she promises, raising her hands as if in reminder of what she can do, and he believes her. If anyone tries to harm Alina, Kirsten can knock them out quicker even than his shadows can manage the task.

He does not know how he has gotten so lucky. There was nothing in particular he did to garner this woman’s trust; really, thinking back, he’d done everything exactly wrong if he’d been trying to manipulate his way into her affections. Yet despite that, she cares anyway. Even against the others — the rest of their group — she would choose him. Would defend Alina on his behalf, knowing nothing else about her but that she is important to Aleksander.

It’s a fool’s errand. She would fight for him, would kill for him, if necessary. And all the while, she is still his sacrifice.

He gathers Alina to his chest and picks her up. Better to sleep in a pew than a second longer on this tomb.

Once she's laid out on the wooden bench, *kefta* keeping her warm and curled in on herself as tight as she can be, he turns to Kirsten.

"Help me, will you?"

He tips his head towards the tomb again, and she follows with a nod.

It takes a lot of effort — and the added strength of Jacek, a considerably more composed Peter, and Natalia's squalling — before they manage to lift the heavy top off the base.

They all peer inside, eager to see what is there, but it is empty. Only cobwebs dust the corners. Whatever of Alina had existed in that prison, it is long gone now. The priest was probably right — her body would've been destroyed by the Shu. They would not have cared to preserve it, and if their experiments could not bring about results, they would have kept trying until there was nothing left.

"So how did you do it then?" Jacek asks. "There was no body, no trace of humanity. Just a stone relief on top of an empty tomb."

He shakes his head. "I don't know."

"But she's really her?" Peter asks, though he should believe more than anyone else here save Ilsa. He has seen her powers with his own eyes. "Sankta Alina? The sun saint?"

What is the answer to that question? Is she still Sankta Alina if that idea only came to be after she was already gone? If it's a tale about a woman who didn't exist in the ways that they remember? Has she ever been Sankta Alina, or is she still his Alinochka?

He doesn't know, and the spiral of thoughts makes his head ache. "In a manner of speaking."

Natalia, perpetually at the back of the group minding her own business, looks at the tomb with mild alarm. When she turns her gaze to him, nothing in that expression melts away. "Should we... kneel?"

"To Alina?"

"To... I don't know. Anyone. You raised the dead and gave her a new body. A saint's returned hundreds of years after her murder." She waves her hands between him and the sleeping Alina like she shouldn't even have to be saying this on account of it being too obvious. "This isn't... none of this is *normal*. You're not just a Grisha, so maybe you are a saint. I don't know. I don't know."

She shakes her head, repeating herself like there's some comfort in admitting how little their world now makes sense.

To some of them, Alina has always been a story, a myth. Not a woman. Not someone who might be making little noises in her sleep a few feet away.

He thinks over Natalia's question, wondering if he might like to have devoted worshippers kneeling at his feet. They already obey him — more or less. Kirsten certainly less than the

others, but Natalia has never caused him trouble. If he tells her to kneel, she will probably do it.

“Not just yet,” he decides. “We still have work to do.”

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Luda surveys the room while Ilsa sits at Alina’s side, watching over her rest. “We can’t stay here forever. We’ve made plenty of noise already, and there is meant to be a service in the morning. If people don’t know that something has happened here by now, they will tomorrow when half their priests are dead.”

He has already killed anyone remaining in the large cathedral complex. No one inside will be bothering them again, from the guards down to the lingering choirboys. “I won’t do anything until Alina is ready.”

“If there’s something wrong, Daiyu and I can heal her.”

He looks over at Alina, shivering in her sleep. Walking over on silent feet, he drapes his own *kefta* across her like a blanket. “Physical injuries aren’t my main concern.”

Luda seems pleased by this answer, already ten steps ahead in her mind, considering where they might go next. “Then let’s leave. We can be out of the city before morning.”

“For all we know, the army is already marching,” he points out. “And then what use will fleeing be?”

“If the army is already marching,” Peter says, coming to stand next to Luda, “then we need not make their job easy for them. We are smaller. With a head start, we can get away. They might not find us.”

“And go where?” Kirsten asks from where she sits in a pew. There is something curiously disinterested in the question, as though she’s already thought this through and found the answer herself. “Where does this journey lead us? Where is this elusive safety that we are chasing?”

Luda groans. “Not smack in the middle of Kribirsk! We might as well offer ourselves up to the executioner.”

Aleksander shrugs, and even without his dark *kefta* wafting around his knees, he feels that mantle he’s created for himself — the *Darkling*, the bringer of night, the man who does not let the dead sleep — settling upon his shoulders.

“If we run, we never stop running. I’m making my stand here.”

“Your weapon?” Peter asks, eyeing him up. Perhaps bringing Alina back has made Aleksander a more worrying, unpredictable ally. Or maybe it has raised him in their esteem, making him out to be a strong contender against an army. Either way, they have seen what he can do. They know that the normal laws of the universe bend to his will. He can create what others cannot — Alina, through the ancient power of the bond between them, and a new weapon, a wall of darkness so vast that it destroys all that it touches, through his handling of *merzost*.

“Yes. Now is the time to create it.”

“Here? In the city? Won’t that put people at risk?” Luda asks.

Of course it will. These people are the legacies of those who killed his beloved. This city must be the epicenter of his creation. Even with her returned to him, there is still a chasm of grief that remains inside him. Nothing has erased her death — life itself cannot undo what has already occurred.

That grief cries out, overflowing within him. It must have its release.

In truth, there is nothing that would please him more than bringing destruction upon this place. To see them pray to her, *Sankta Alina have mercy on us* on their lips, as the darkness descends. And she will not answer, because he is their monster. She will not protect them, just as they deserve.

But he’s not going to tell Luda that. “Leave that concern to me.”

\*\*\*

Alina sleeps for nearly three hours before her hands start to glow.

“Eryk,” Ilsa calls out, voice alarmed. “Something’s wrong.”

Only a half hour before, Alina had shrugged her way out from beneath his *kefta*, and he’d taken it back before it could get thrown to the ground. It had seemed a good sign that she wasn’t so cold. Like life had been returning to her, minute by minute.

But now her hands look like burning embers, and he wonders if that warmth wasn’t the good sign he’d been hoping for.

Before he can move — think, even — the pew beneath her goes up in flames.

“Ilsa!” He calls, his own shadows forgotten. “Stop her!”

The young girl has to concentrate, an abject terror on her face that hadn’t been there even when they’d fought the *drüskelle* all those weeks before. Her hands move with precision,

following the exact motions that Jacek and Aleksander had tried to teach her to better hone her skills. A burst of her water shoots out, drenching the bench and Alina both.

The immediate threat dealt with, Aleksander turns to focus on the fire spreading down the remainder of the pew. This cathedral is, until the moment of reckoning, their only sanctuary. It is from here that he would like to make his stand, and it won't do to see it go up in smoke.

His mind now cleared of that burst of fear, he allows his shadows to twist and crawl along the same path, chasing the flames until they are smothered under the weight of darkness.

Alina, soaked from her rescue, jerks frantically, her mind still taken by the dream. He lets his shadows caress her skin, cooling her molten red palms.

“Wake up, *solnishka*,” he says, kneeling by her head like a penitent. “You’re not there. It’s not real.”

She whimpers again but does not rouse. “Kirsten, stop.”

“I’m not keeping her asleep. This is all her.”

“Then give her a jolt. Wake her up.”

Kirsten does as bid, and Alina returns to consciousness like a drowning woman finally reaching the air. A desperate gasp reverberates from her chest as her eyes flash open. “Faces,” she says, voice raspy.

“Faces?”

“All around me. In the dark. Faces and… and so much blood.”

He wants to tell her not to think on it — that those people are dead in the ground where they belong, their names obliterated by time. He would dig them up and kill them again, burn their bodies and desecrate the remains, but even he would not know where to look. They are, in every way, unremarkable, and thus time has given them no legs to stand on. No memory.

If he could protect her from these nightmares, he would do it.

“That was the night you died,” he says instead.

“You were there,” she whispers, hands trembling. At least this time they are the same color as the rest of her skin. “In the dark, you were there. Beside me. Watching.”

“I couldn’t stop them,” he says, voice wavering under the memories. “I wasn’t really there. I was… a dream, maybe. A ghost.”

A memory of someone who wasn’t even born yet.

The others stand around and watch, but they feel invisible to him. They are no more than furniture now, and their eyes on him can be no more troubling than that of the door, or the baptismal font, or the drapery on the walls.

Her hand traces those golden scars again, a brutal reminder of his failures. “Okay,” she whispers.

And that is all. She offers nothing else.

“Okay,” he returns.

\*\*\*

He sends Konrad and Kirsten out for supplies. They have no money, but Konrad, with his a deft hand for creation as a materialnik, is also a consummate thief. Kirsten is there to stop the hearts of anyone who might get in their way.

This will be their last chance to prepare before whatever is coming arrives.

They sneak out through a back exit of the building, careful to hide themselves among the townspeople as quickly as possible. They do not wish to stand out.

“There are guards at the perimeter,” Luda says, standing on a bench so that she can look out the high windows of the cathedral. “Plain clothes, but obvious enough with their weapons at their sides. They must know all is not well here, but they don’t want to storm the building until they have more intel. Or until backup arrives.”

“Then let them wait.”

\*\*\*

Another day passes. When their scouting party returns, the group eats food paid for with stolen money. Alina tries to remember, but memories only come in grating flashes, so Ilsa keeps her entertained enough that she need not be plagued by those thoughts.

Someone is always stationed at the window, watching and waiting. It will have to be soon.

He wants to time it right. If the army really is to come, as Kirsten heard in the whispers among the gossiping merchants, then it would be wise not to act until they arrive. The weaker he can make his enemy, the better.

He has within him the weapon that no one can counter, a stirring sort of darkness that begs to be freed from the confines of his ribcage. Kribirsk and its people will be the first to taste his vengeance. One day, when the people look up upon his creation, they will pray in her

cathedral for forgiveness. Her name will sit heavy on their tongues, a reminder of their mistakes.

\*\*\*

People come to gawk at the cathedral, wondering what is happening inside and why the bells have ceased their ringing. There was no morning service to attend.

They stand at a safe distance, and though the shadows dance at his fingertips, begging to be released into the crowd so that they might realize the scope of the threat he presents to them, he doesn't take any action.

Waiting, waiting, waiting for the right moment. He can wait. He can be patient. The world has already been kind enough to him. Now, there is no rush. The most precious thing is already returned.

The group sleeps fitfully, spread out over the cold marble floor. There are rooms, they know — cells for the priests to use — but no one had wanted to split up, not when the army is marching. They have slept around campfires for weeks on end, and the reassurance of having someone at your back is better than the privacy offered by single rooms. It's not comfortable, but no one minds anymore. Not enough to change their ways.

“It’s good that she’s resting again,” Ilsa says, looking down at Alina. Her brow is furrowed, but he expects that now. There is so much about this that he has not explained, but he has no intention to try. They can imagine whatever story they like to fill in the gaps.

“Not well.” He can see, even now, how nightmares hover around his *solnishka* like dark clouds. They are the fog and mist that kept her from running away with the children, and now they trap her once more, never allowing her to break their chains.

He isn’t sure what would’ve been better — for her to have all her memories, of him, of them, but also these last, terrible ones, or for her to be a blank slate, remembering nothing. It is selfish, maybe, to not want to be left behind by her. He would have despaired to look into her wide, dark eyes, once more awake and present, only to see no recognition whatsoever. At least like this, a face she has seen, a remembered purple sea, he is not nothing. He is not irrelevant and meaningless. There is enough of a whiff of the past about her that he can drag himself into her future, too.

She jerks in her sleep, letting out a muffled shout. Ilsa shakes her head. “No, not well.”

“Thank you, Ilsa,” he says suddenly, and she turns to him. There is shock on her features, pure and distilled. She wouldn’t be able to mask it even if she tried. It makes her an excellent ally — loyal and trusting and unable to hide any thought from him. Crystal clear without any hint of deception.

Maybe it's wrong to think like that. She is a child, and he shouldn't be trying to manipulate her.

But she has made herself manipulatable, and he needs all the help he can get.

“What for?”

“For—” He grasps at the words, needing to make even himself understand. If he were smarter, he might butter her up. He might offer her so much praise that she basks in it, stupid and sated because someone of power recognizes her as a capable player on the board.

But while he is certainly smart enough — his mother saw to that, reminding him always of the best maneuver in any scenario — he finds that he can't do it. The impetus to thank her had been genuine, not calculated. Even after everything, she still has faith. Most of the others have probably doubted him more than a few times, but Ilsa has never wavered. Even when he didn't trust himself, more of a rattling need for revenge than a person, she had hoped that he would give them something better.

He will. Maybe not how she wants it. Maybe not in a way that she will benefit from. But he will.

“For being here. And for helping her.”

Ilsa looks over at Alina again, and her face softens into something sad. “She's nice.”

For a brief moment, jealousy eclipses whatever goodwill he'd felt. Alina has always been *his*. Whoever else might've claimed her days, he was always more important. Now that she is here, that he might command all her time, others are realizing too that she is a prize.

But he calms himself, remembering that he likes Ilsa well enough, and he could never appreciate someone who didn't like Alina anyway. “She is.”

“And she's confused.”

He purses his lips, his nod perfunctory.

Ilsa's voice sounds so young when she speaks again, burdened by that childlike optimism that comes from the wishfulness of fairytales. “Will you help her remember?”

He only has two objectives in the universe, and one will be finished just as soon as the king's army makes it convenient for him to do so. The rest of his life, endless as he dreams it will be, will be in service to her.

“Yes, I will help her.”

Ilsa smiles, a fractured hope hidden within it. “I'm glad.”

\*\*\*

Alina doesn't scream when she wakes from her nightmares this time.

The others don't notice, too lost in their own sleep to be disturbed when she shoots up from her place on the floor, but Aleksander had been too wired to rest. His eyes had already been on her, vigilant.

"Are you well, Alina?"

It's a foolish question, but he doesn't know how else to help her. Should he move closer? Touch her shoulder, even? Or should he stay far away? Does his face feature prominently in her nightmares, the man holding the stick?

"I saw them again," she whispers, the words dragged from her throat as her chest rises unsteadily beneath her hand. "Circled around me, trying to—"

Her voice cuts out, that strange, open silence of the cathedral filling in the gaps. "I won't let anyone else touch you, Alina. Never again."

He has promised himself this a thousand times, and he means it. He would sooner let them cut him into a million pieces and scatter him to distant lands. If he still has a body left to protect her with, he will.

But before that can happen, he will scatter a few of them to distant lands, too.

She looks at him, face paler than usual in the dim light coming through the windows. There is something guileless about her, as innocent as she's ever been.

"I can still feel it. Like a headache that won't stop."

He's not sure that she's saying any of this to *him* specifically, but he scoots closer anyway. When there's only half a foot between them, he puts his hand on the ground between them.

"They will pay for it."

If he half-expects her to talk him down, he's not disappointed when she nods instead.

"Sometimes..." Her voice is so quiet, barely more than a breath of air. He leans in to hear it, grateful for the excuse. She doesn't smell quite the same — there's something ancient in the scent, almost like how Morozova's journals had smelled after he'd unearthed them — but he doesn't mind. She's here, smelling like the earth and life and hope. "Sometimes, I almost remember. I almost see you. It's like you don't exist, and then the memories appear out of nowhere, and then they're gone again before I can look too close. Like you're only half there."

She puts her hand down as well. Not on top of his, but next to it so that the edges of their pinkies are touching.

“You only ever remembered me when you were sleeping,” he says, desperate to cover her hand with his own. To touch her, to envelop her. To know that, if he is touching her, then she is real, and that he can keep her safe. “Every morning, when the dreams came to an end, you would forget me.”

She nods, staring at their hands in wonder, like she too is thinking about what it might be like to feel him. After a long pause, she tips her head up, looking at him. Their noses are so close, only a whispered prayer between them.

“Why?” So soft, so uncertain.

“I’m not sure. Maybe you weren’t meant to remember. Maybe it would’ve messed up whatever it is that the universe intends for us.” He steadies himself before finally moving, his hand blanketing hers. She lets out a soft breath. “When you died... when I couldn’t save you... I thought it was all over. That whatever purpose we were meant to share was an illusion — if you were dead the whole time, then what was the point? I thought maybe... maybe I was meant to seek revenge, but even that seemed a hollow victory. But now you’re here again. Whatever we’re meant to do, whatever the world wants us to be to each other, we can do it. There’s time; I will make sure of it.”

She leans forward, letting her forehead rest on his shoulder. He raises his free hand until it’s stroking her back, up and down in a soothing pattern. “I wish I remembered more. It’s... it’s all so jumbled in my head.”

“You will. Rest now, Alinochka. There is time.”

“I’m not sure I can.” She turns her head, her nose against the column of his neck. “It’s loud. So loud, every time I try to sleep. They’re always screaming at me.”

He grits his teeth before forcing the tension out of his body. A cocoon of shadows spins itself around them until they are entirely cut off from the rest of the world. The darkness is encompassing, like getting swallowed whole by a storm, but she doesn’t flinch, only burying herself closer to his body. “Then I will make it quiet for you.”

Against his skin, she murmurs, almost as if in a dream again, “Sasha...”

His heart bursts in his chest, and he has to fight to keep still. Overcome, his hand balls up into a fist on her back. It takes several moments before he can smooth his fingers back out and continue to comfort her.

“You remember that?” The words are broken, broken, yet somehow wholly, perfectly alive now that she knows him. *You remember me?*

“I— yes. Yes. Sasha. A dark forest — just us.”

He can’t stop himself quick enough, turning his head without thought to kiss her temple. “Yes, Alina. Your Sasha.”

Whatever doubt she might've had seems to abandon her then, and she curls into him completely. There is an age-old exhaustion in her, like it's been festering since her first life in bones that did not yet exist.

“What happens now, Sasha? What will become of me?”

He hears the words that she does not give voice to. *How will I ever feel safe again, knowing what they will do to destroy me? What becomes of a saint who stops being a story? Have you raised me from the darkness only to see me murdered again?*

*Or worse, to see all of them murdered together, the last stand of the Grisha?*

“It’s okay, *solnishka*,” he says, the whispers nearly buried in her hair. “I won’t let anyone touch you again. With both of our abilities finally available... They will not be prepared to face us.” He keeps talking, offering reassurances and soothing sounds until he feels her slumped against him, seconds from sleep. “Do not be afraid,” he reminds her, hoping that if he says it enough, she might carry his reassurances with her into her dreams. “Our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.”

A gift, a warning, a prophecy. More than any of that though, it is something that he will kill for. Anything that stands in the way of their fate will be destroyed.

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Can't wait for that dang army to show up.

Comments are my lifeblood and I appreciate all of them immensely.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

We've finally made it to the penultimate chapter !!! (for real this time, there will only be one more after this to wrap things up. My days of lying about the length of this fic are over)

There were three scenes I imagined when I was coming up with the premise for this story. The first was Sasha bent over a saint's tomb—a monument to a woman that no one knew but him — crying out to her and trying valiantly to raise her from the dead.

The second was the death of a young girl in the darkness, terrified but not alone.

And the third was this. Their vengeance.

This story has always been an alternate universe tale for how the fold could've come into existence. I am so excited that this scene turned out even better than I originally imagined it in my head.

Thank you all so much for reading. I have loved building this world, the darkling relationship, and the OCs that made it all work. I'm so excited to bring this home with the final two chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Every time Alina's eyes close for more than a few minutes, she starts to tremble, waking herself up in a fright. The more sleep she loses, the more her eyes grow bloodshot and wary. The caged animal inside her rears its head as it realizes she's still trapped in the same cathedral that has held her prisoner for so long.

The more she jolts awake, the less stable her powers become. He has to stop her from lighting the building on fire three different times, and it ends with the both of them tired to their core.

The next day is the same. Her exhaustion makes her grouchy, and he barely stops her from cutting Ilsa in half over a quip. Alina doesn't even seem phased by it, which is what shocks him the most. He might've thought that she would snap out of it immediately, seeing the Cut form at her hand, ready to slice through an ally, but she doesn't. She only glares, letting out an aggrieved huff of air as Ilsa skitters away.

It takes four hours for her to calm down enough to feel guilty. He wouldn't have made her apologize — he doesn't really think she has to, in truth — but she does anyway, and he's glad of it. He wants Alina to be able to fight for herself, but he also knows that the girl that he'd once loved, cloaked in the false safety of dreams and sunlight, wouldn't want to be a danger

to her friends. He doesn't like to think that she is lost to the world forever. Not all of her, anyway.

"I don't feel like myself," she whispers to him later, under the cover of night. They don't sleep anymore. Not as much as they should. It comes in splutters, uncomfortable and restless. The little that they manage does not rejuvenate them, but there are bigger concerns. If she rests, she might bring the whole cathedral down around them. "Something is wrong with me."

He looks over at her, returning her whispers. "What do you mean?"

"I'm so... I'm so angry." She looks down at her palms, scrubbing one with the opposite thumb as if she might remove a stain. "All the time. So angry."

"At what?" He asks, though the answer is obvious.

The word rings out in his head just moments before she echoes it. "Everything." Looking around the room, jaw clenched, she tries to contain that anger. To tamp it down, making it her vassal rather than her lord. "All of it. Every sound, every person, every sensation. It's all wrong. Too much. And I—"

She stops herself, the words stuck in her throat.

"It's just everything," she says again, forlorn.

"Me?"

He doesn't know why he asks. It's not fair to ask, but maybe he's never been fair. Maybe nothing about them was ever fair to begin with. He has always been lurking in her shadow, stealing away her warmth, the dying light of a star so distant that he didn't even know she'd already burnt out long ago.

Her head shakes, slow and listless. "Not you."

"No? Why?"

She looks up at him, confusion painting her features. It's stupid to ask, but he couldn't hold it in, and now it sits between them. *Why?* Why would he be the exception? He's more irritating than the rest of their group combined, watching her every movement like she might disappear again. Monitoring what she eats so that she is sure to get enough, trying to convince her to rest even when she refuses, putting out her fires and staying her hand. "I would understand if I make you angry, too."

He'd almost thought to say *I wouldn't be upset if you said I make you angry, too*, but it would be a lie. He might understand it, might be able to rationalize it into bite-sized pieces that make sense if you don't try to assemble them into a bigger picture, but he wouldn't like it. He wouldn't be okay with it. A better Aleksander would lie to her, at least. Pretend that he was okay even if he wasn't. But he's not sure there's a better Aleksander left to hope for.

There is only this one: the one who will destroy everything — this town, the church, his friends — just to save her. If it gives the Grisha a better future, then he will be glad. But if it only protects his Alinochka, then that is enough.

She motions with her hands, some strange pantomime from which he can't decipher a meaning. When he quirks a brow at her, she only sighs. "You're... constant." She slumps over in resignation to the night, laying her head down on his thigh. Her eyes stare out into the room around them, blank. "Everything else is so blurred, and dark, and bloodstained. But you're there too — everywhere. In the corner of every memory, waiting for me to notice you."

It's an odd response. He isn't quite sure that it's a compliment, and yet he's unreasonably glad that he's taken up so much space in her mind. Once upon a time, she had spent each day forgetting his existence until she returned to those unholy dreams.

Now he is the lodestar she can use to guide herself. If he is useful to her, then he is happy.

"I'm glad, then. That you have something that doesn't feel wrong. Something that doesn't make you angry." He preens at his own words, though he tries not to let it come out in his voice. *He* is the thing that doesn't make her angry. *He* is the one that she looks to for comfort.

His fingers work along the base of her neck, circling into tense muscles. She lets out a little whimper at the feeling. This body — somehow new and old all at once — contains a timeless ache. It has built upon itself over centuries, rolled like a snowball that keeps growing the longer it goes.

She doesn't say anything, but when his hands still for too long, she nuzzles into his leg, making it obvious what she expects of him. He laughs, and though it's low and tired, it feels real. She is real. There is a life for them beyond these walls: a life that he can give her, if he only reminds himself that the sacrifice is worth it.

"It's okay to be angry," he says to fill the silence. He's angry about a lot of things. A lot of things all the time. And yet it hasn't destroyed him, hasn't burned the world around his feet until he went up in flames with it. No, just the opposite, really. That anger gave him the gift of her all over again. He fosters his anger, nurturing it like a baby bird.

...Although, perhaps not like the baby bird that he killed, all that time ago. Other birds. The kind that might prove useful to him for more than their death.

"What happened to you was horrible. No one should live with those memories — of being tortured, of *dying*. And yet you do. You should be angry, I think. It would be worse if you weren't. There's a time and a place for forgiveness, even for someone as kind as you. Now is not that time."

"I don't feel very kind at all."

Her face heats against his leg, and he wonders if even now her rage is climbing steadily within her, stoking the fires until they're prepared to burst out in beams of pure light.

“Then don’t be. The world is not kind, and you do not owe it your kindness.”

She wraps her tiny hand around his ankle. The bones of her fingers seem delicate, but her grip is ironclad.

“Good.”

“Good?”

“When is the army meant to come?” She asks instead. “I’m tired.”

She does not sleep that night either, and when Jacek tries to take the last of their jam at breakfast — a pitiful meal, now that their food supply is running low again — she almost takes off his head.

This time, she does not apologize at all.

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The others grow wary of being around Alina.

He does nothing to alleviate their fears.

Better for them to know that she is a vengeful saint, bent on destruction. If it is true or not is immaterial. He would rather the story get out this way than any other.

People should fear her. It is only right.

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Konrad tries to sneak out again, but they get less information this time. The folks in the market are cagey when talking to a stranger, knowing well enough that *something* unholy is happening in their saint’s own cathedral, even if they aren’t sure exactly what it is or who is doing it. Those horrid people had either killed their priests or taken them hostage, but since no demands have been made, they can assume only the worst.

A barricade has been built around most of the building, and it is only because Konrad is a materialnik that he manages to sneak through it at all.

The information they receive doesn’t come from the citizens, no. It comes from the city. The silence.

The next day, by mid afternoon, when the markets should be at their loudest, there is an eerie quiet. There's something bated about it — a feeling that they are poised at a crossroads, where one wrong movement will send them careening one way or another without their consent.

"It'll be today," Aleksander says, speaking to the room at large without bothering to look up from his clenched fists. Already he can feel the powers wanting to leap out of him. It is time to end this, and soon enough, he will. "Or tomorrow at the latest. The army is here."

"How can you tell?" Ilsa asks, though she, too, seems clued into the stillness. The church is never loud, but that muted background noise has faded, and she can feel how wrong it is.

"The town is waiting. They couldn't stop their markets the whole week — not if people were to continue getting their goods and making money. We didn't present enough of a threat for that, contained as we are. But today they will have been warned to stay at home."

"And you're ready?" Kirsten asks, assessing him. "Because we can try to hold them back, but it won't last long. Not long enough to defeat an army. We need your weapon."

He looks around at them, taking in their scared, hopeful faces. They trust him.

They trust him, they trust him, and he is going to betray them.

He allows himself a moment to be sad, a moment to mourn. They cared for him. Some more than others, but all in a noticeable way. They followed him. They fought beside him. They helped him finish Alina's *kefta*, the gift that clothes her even now.

He feels it all for a moment, and then he steels himself against it. His emotions melt within him, curling deeper in on themselves until there is nothing left — just a single, dense core of affection that he discards so thoroughly as to believe it never existed at all.

"I'm ready."

"Is there anything you need from us?" She asks.

"Only that you stay close when everything happens. And do as I say. I might need your help to channel the amount of energy it'll take."

He will definitely need their help, but he isn't going to tell them that. There is safety in his ambiguity — they don't have to wonder exactly what their fate will be. They can hold onto their naive hopes until the final moments. That is the gift he offers them.

"You've never told us what the weapon is," Peter points out, trying to sound rational. It might've worked, if his voice wasn't threaded with the fear that one only ever hears from the unhinged. He is close to panic, Aleksander knows.

Though, to be fair, Alina has nearly killed him four separate times. Even without the army on their doorstep, he would probably be close to breaking.

Ilsa glares at Peter for even thinking to question him. Far too trusting, as ever.

“What? He hasn’t! How are we supposed to go into battle if we don’t know what the plan is?” He looks around at the others. “We could have fled days ago, but we stayed because he said it would be safer. So what is the plan? Why don’t we get to know?”

“There doesn’t need to be a battle. My plan will be enough on its own.” Peter doesn’t look at all reassured, so he continues. “The weapon is darkness.”

He says nothing else, staring Peter down. He glares at the others too — those who looked swayed by Peter’s words.

“Darkness? How will that kill—?”

“You’ve seen him kill, Peter,” Kirsten reminds him. “You know it’s possible. We only survived in Fjerda because of his abilities.”

“But darkness on its own is not a weapon! Not one big enough to take out a whole army. We beat a *town*, a *tiny* one, and that took all of us to manage.”

Aleksander takes a deep, slow breath, commanding the room effortlessly. “Darkness can be a weapon too, if you concentrate it enough. If you make it big enough.”

He does not mention *merzost*. He does not mention the cost.

“Enough to kill the entire opposing side before they kill us?”

“I believe so.”

“And we are putting all our lives on the line for something you only believe to be possible?”

“I will help him,” Alina offers. There is something lost and dark in her eyes. Enraged. Not at them. Not at Peter, though Aleksander is certainly annoyed. Her anger is directionless. It grows inside her with no outlet, and he is powerless to stop it. Does he even want to stop it? He isn’t sure. “I can do it. I will help.”

“Like I said,” Aleksander cuts in, trying to stop her from making a promise that will only complicate things for him, “everyone will help me. I can draw energy from each of you, to make it possible. It will be enough to stop the army.”

“And then this will all be over,” Ilsa says, almost dreamlike. “And maybe the next generation of Grisha will never know what it’s like to live in fear.”

Alina tenses, but she nods. He wonders what she’s thinking. “They won’t.”

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If he wanted a fight, he would station them throughout the cathedral. Some on the ground floor, waiting near the exits. Some up in the two towers, ready to stop hearts or rain fire. They would have every angle covered, prepared to compensate for their smaller size by using the high ground and the building's natural defenses to their advantage.

But he doesn't want a fight. He wants destruction. He wants chaos. He wants to wipe the enemy out until there is nothing but dust left to mourn them.

He wants death, and he will have it.

So when the army's marching becomes evident, he leads the Grisha out the front doors, lined up like prisoners waiting for execution.

The king's men will think him a fool. It hardly matters. Soon, they will not be thinking anything at all.

Kirsten and the others stand to his left. Only Alina stands to his right, off on her own. She looks a cross between nervous and mutinous, and she can't seem to tell which to settle on.

"It won't be like before," he whispers, eyes never leaving the marching lines before them. They are small still, ants coming towards the unknown enemy. But here, at the edge of the city where there is the wide open space that you never see elsewhere in the twisting, tiny Kribirsk roads, they are nearly defenseless. No cover beyond the perimeter barricades they'd tried to erect. Shadow cares little for how high you build a wall.

She nods, watching too. Her hand, warm and dry, tucks itself into his own. He squeezes it. For now, for this single moment of anticipation, he will comfort her.

"What are you going to do?" Her voice is dry too, raspy and a little harsh. Not like Alina — sweet Alina with the nightdresses. Good little Alina who picked flowers and played tag. Perhaps whatever is left of her has been reduced to ash and flecks of bone in Shu Han. Or perhaps she is still in that forest, vines growing between ribs and body covered in unending fog.

"It will be okay, Alina. I will make it right."

She tugs on his hand with greater force than he expects, and his body follows the motion. When she has his ear pulled down to her lips, she whispers, furious. "Tell me what you're planning. I am not going to die like this again. Not even for you."

He splutters, and the others down the line take their eyes off the enemy to give him strange looks. He turns to her, their noses almost brushing. "Why did you wait until *now* of all times —? You couldn't have asked earlier?"

"You might've lied earlier. You might've had the time to think of a pretty answer, dressed up so that I might not see the cracks." The gold on her face seems all the starker under the sun. "I want to know the truth."

"I'm going to kill them. All of them."

She glances over again at the army. At the city, maybe. Everything. Then she looks back, assessing. “All of them?”

“Yes.”

“Good. But you didn’t have that power before. I would remember that.” There’s frustration in her eyes, like she knows there are gaps in her memory still, and yet she is sure enough that she could not forget something so big, so terrible. “I would’ve known. So how are you doing it?”

“Alina—”

She grabs his collar, cutting off his thought. “How are you doing it?”

“*Merzost.*”

The word is whispered, a dirty secret. She says nothing. He can’t remember if he’d ever even told her about *merzost*. Perhaps she doesn’t know the meaning at all. An abomination certainly, but of what kind? What making?

“Sasha,” she admonishes, but it’s too late. It’s too late. “You should’ve told me.” The war horn cries out. Their moment has ended.

He lets go of her hand.

“You are trespassing!” Comes a ringing voice from across the distance between the two groups. “On holy ground, owned by the Holy Church of Our Saints and the King of Ravka!”

Aleksander shrugs, exaggerated enough that they might see it from across the way.

“Will you not surrender? The king will show mercy if you stand down.”

“He won’t, and he shouldn’t,” Aleksander calls back. “We will not stand down.”

“Then you will be fired upon at will,” the general says. Not a threat or a warning: only a reminder. A truth.

“Do what you must.”

The others seem frightened around him, Alina included, but he only holds out his hand to Kirsten.

“You trust me?” He asks.

She frowns before nodding. He has already forgotten his care for her, tied up within that same useless mass of affections. It is gone, and yet still something inside him tries to pang. The memory of sadness, perhaps. Nothing concrete, but enough to assure him that, even now, he is not without a heart. His humanity cannot be so easily displaced.

“I trust you.”

“Good. Whatever happens here, the future Grisha will remember us.”

The words are too low for the others to hear, but they link hands anyway. Ilsa beside Kirsten, then Luda, then Jacek. The line stretches all the way down to Peter at the end, whose energy is the least useful to Aleksander. He is the least convinced, and thus the least giving. Aleksander will pull from the furthest edge first, and then maybe Peter will finally learn to shut up.

The first line raises their rifles, aiming at the unmoving line. They must appear as if idiots, staging no defense against a veritable firing squad.

The general raises his hand, preparing his men to fire. Alina, standing alone to his right, acts without thought.

Her hand slashes up, and the whole first line falls. They slide to the ground with an ugly, wet sound, their bodies sliced clean through their torsos. The general cries out in alarm. She has left him unmarked.

“You will not touch us.” She does not raise her voice, does not yell. It is only the conviction with which it is said that carries it to waiting ears. “Lower your weapons, and you will have a good death. Fast, honorable. Like these men.”

“Aim!” The general calls, the second line shuffling to prepare. Their hands shake, now exposed to Alina’s ire.

“If that’s what you want.”

Before he can shout fire, Alina does it for him. From her hands flies another Cut, quick and sharp, but the light that forms it is so blinding that it singes the bodies as it cuts through them. As the second line falls — the third and fourth behind it dropping too — the ground does not stain with blood. The severed bodies are cauterized by her touch, and the air begins to smell of melting flesh. Some of their clothes catch fire, and the bodies are helpless in the wake of the flames.

It’s quick, and loud, and ugly. Many of the men must’ve had their trigger fingers ready, and bullets rain out in the half-second after her attack. They shoot in every direction, going wide of their intended target.

“What are you doing?” Aleksander asks, words muttered under his breath.

“Destroying the enemy. Why, what are you doing?”

He lets out a huff, not wasting any more time.

From the connection between palms, he starts to spin the web of *merzost*. First it is only in his head, a darkness that one could get lost in. He could get turned around in it easily, and he thanks his own foresight for practicing this before trying it for real. There is a method, a pattern to the magic. He pulls and weaves, letting it cloak him in power.

Tighter, faster, pulling, pulling. He hears Peter drop to his knees at the end, but Aleksander pays him no mind. Peter does not pull his hand back, caught too deep in the entanglement, and the energy that he can use does not lessen.

The darkness starts to spin out before him, a rift in the air. More horrifying and more beautiful than anything he's created before. The bird could not give him this, innocent as it was. For this, he needs more. Life spent and wasted on the altar of annihilation.

*What will you give?* it asks. The same question it had posed before taking a memory from him on that very first try.

Not this time. A memory is not enough — it would tear him apart if he tried, until his mind was a blank husk.

*I give you all of them. Eleven lives, ripe for the taking. Young, hopeful, naive. Eleven heartbeats and eleven minds.*

The magic pulls, again and again and again until even Kirsten seems weak beside him. But the darkness grows, blanketing the cathedral behind them.

Aleksander steps forward, and the other stagger to follow. A step, another, the darkness trailing them as they close in on the enemy.

The harried frontlines try to load their weapons, but Alina cuts through them, savage and ugly. They will die slower. Blood mars the earth, and this time, she revels in it. It is not hers. It will not be hers again.

There is a gleam in her eyes. An almost delight. The freedom to destroy has awakened something in the broken remains of her. Even as his weapon grows, she does not stop. These are her deaths as much as his.

He pushes the darkness forward, its tendrils reaching out like loving hands. Embracing.

The world goes dark around him. Even he cannot see through the pervasive black.

When it reaches the soldiers, he hears cries of agony. Then—

Ripping?

Ripping flesh, tearing itself apart at the seams. The screams don't stop, growing louder and louder until they mutate into a new sound.

He pushes forward, and more human cries join the cacophony.

Shrieks. Shrill and angry. The beating of wings.

He cannot see Alina, but he feels when she touches his arm.

“You’re killing them!” She yells, having to shout over the noise. Not the army — she does not care about that. Kirsten’s hand is limp in his.

“I can’t stop now!”

As the darkness grows around them, so too does it grow within. It twists around his insides, filling his veins and tearing apart his soul. It ties him in knots, bending him to its will.

This is the price of *merzost*. He will pay it. He will master it.

Alina sends her light racing out around them, pushing forward until there is a clear path cutting through to the edge of darkness, to the remains of the army. She screams as she does it, the pain of pushing aside his power visceral.

Dead bodies litter the ground around them. Some dead by her hand, some by his. The ones killed by his creation look torn apart, black blood erupting from their eye sockets.

But there are not enough dead. Not enough to account for what he must’ve already destroyed.

Some of them are in the sky. The frantic beating of wings. The sounds of human skin becoming something other.

Alina takes his hand, and for a moment the *merzost* rushes out of him with renewed vigor. Her strength is far greater than all the rest, but he does not want it. He tries to pull away, but she holds tight.

“Let the others go,” she commands.

“No!”

She holds up a burning hand, radiant sunlight distilled in it, and lets it sit just before his face. “Let them go.” It’s a threat this time. “They will not be enough.”

He frowns. He thought she wanted to *save* them. “What?”

“They will not be enough. I can feel it. Let them go.” He does not move. Not out of disobedience, but confusion. “What is the point in killing them if their deaths will not do what I want?”

The hand in his drags him forward, and he lets go of Kirsten against his will. She drops to the ground — now sand rather than grass, like the *merzost* has stripped the land of anything living — and the others follow, crumpling into themselves. Alive, but exhausted. Alina’s light will protect them.

He steps forward behind her, trying to control this abomination still in his chest. He can not stop it, not like how he did the other times. He cannot turn it off, or fold it in on itself. It grows like a living being, feeding on him.

She pulls him to the edge of the darkness, and it stops expanding forward when she reaches it. The men there are in shambles, trying desperately to get away without being trampled by the crowd. Behind them, in the distant streets, he can hear chaos. Unrest. The fear of the approaching end.

One of them, trying to climb over dead bodies in a rush to escape, turns to see her. Light halos her, and he falls over in shock.

“Sankta,” he says, almost a prayer. “Sankta, protect us.”

“Sankta Alina,” others whisper when they turn to look. Many stop running. They were too far back in the original formation to see who had been felling their comrades. They do not know what she is capable of. To them, she is salvation. “She stopped the darkness. She stopped it from moving.”

A group of believers forms, looking to Alina’s light for guidance. Others continue to flee. They are the smarter set.

She looks to the first soldier. “What is your name?”

“Gleb.” He sounds mystified, face slack. There is blood and dirt covering most of his skin, but he stands firm, refusing to run. Aleksander had used that name once before, on the run from men like this one. It feels like a century ago now. *Gleb.* “Sankta, please—”

“Gleb.” She raises her hand, beckoning him towards her. “Come.”

He glances to Aleksander, still standing beside Alina. There is a moment of hesitation, but then he walks. He stumbles over stray limbs on the ground the entire way.

When he reaches her, she looks him over, face placid. “Why do you call my name? Why do you pray to me for protection?”

“Sankta, I—” He chokes on his words. “You are—you’re *light.*” He becomes emphatic. “We have been praying to you since your death at the hands of the Fjerdans.”

“The Fjerdans?” Her head cocks to the side. Aleksander hadn’t told her how they spoke of her. There hadn’t been time, and she hadn’t been ready.

“We love you, Sankta!” One of the men calls from a few paces away. “Save us! Mercy!”

Others echo the words. *Mercy. Sankta. Mercy.*

The power inside him keeps eating away, but he does not let the darkness expand any further, and they find assurance in that. The enemy has halted in its tracks.

“You love me?” Genuine confusion as she looks out among the faithful. “You say that you love me?”

“You are our patron,” Gleb says, voice awed. “You have protected our city and our families for centuries. And now you have returned to us at our time of greatest need. That is not an accident.”

He reaches down, pulling her hand up to kiss the knuckles. She stares at it for a moment before brushing the backs of her fingers over his cheek. His eyes close, reverent.

“It’s not an accident.” Then, in a louder voice, one that will carry to all those who are listening. “You say that you love me.” Her soft face hardens, resembling the stone woman she’d once been. “But I know that I am only useful to you as something dead. A sad, pretty story that you tell to make yourselves feel better; a story where you are the heroes. The wronged party.” She drops her hand from his cheek, clenching it around Gleb’s throat until he is left gasping. She could kill him in a single second, but she refrains. Looking in his eyes, her voice still loud enough that the others will hear, she continues. “I am of no use to you like this: a creature who has seen as much darkness as she has light. You will fear me and destroy me, just as you did the first time.”

“Sankta, we won’t!” Cries one of the bystanders. “We didn’t!”

She growls, turning towards the assembled audience to stare down the one stupid enough to interrupt her.

“I am *not* your pet saint. You don’t get to kill me and then cry and pray about it while you still murder my people.” She points back into the darkness, where her path of light illuminates the bodies of the fallen Grisha. “*Those* are my people, not you. I protect them.”

Gleb lets out a pitiful sound beneath her hand, breathy and weak. “Sankta—”

She leans in close, words only for him. “I am not your sweet, demure sankta. I will not go quietly into your marble tombs a second time.” She presses her lips to his cheek, murmuring words against his skin. Aleksander strains to hear. “You will remember this when I say it, understand?” Using the hand on his neck, she forces him to nod. “I am not a saint. I am a Grisha. I am a goddess. I will spare only you today. Only you and no more. And you will carry these words home with you. Tell your king. Tell your armies. Alina the Sun Summoner is coming for them, and when I am through, anyone who stands in my way will be fertilizer. You will all know what it is to stare death in the face, just as I have.”

A shiver travels down Aleksander’s spine. He is in love with her. He would turn himself to fertilizer without a second thought if she commanded him to do so in this tone.

She pulls back. “Can you remember that, Gleb?” A tear tracks down his cheek, and she kisses it away, tasting it on her lips. “Because if not, I will find a new messenger.”

He nods, eyes huge. The whites are stark against his dirty face.

Her lips have blood and dirt from his skin on them. Aleksander wants to bite it off. Even the *merzost* shudders within him, wanting to wrap itself around her.

“Alina,” he whimpers.

“Stay close, pet,” she says to Gleb, and Aleksander rankles at being ignored. She should not be focusing on the *otkazat’sya* of all people. “You will still need to be useful at the end of this.”

Gleb turns to look at the others, trying to tell them to run, but there is no time.

She pulls her hand away from his throat, throwing him to the ground at her feet before moving to take Aleksander's face between her palms.

"Alina," he repeats in veneration. He is the only one who should hold her in such esteem. The only one who can say her name like a lilting hymn.

"They were not enough. Not for what I want," she says, and he can't for the life of him remember what it's supposed to mean. Something about Kirsten, maybe? And the others? "But I have rage enough for the two of us. This will be my monster."

Through the tether, that anchored celestial *something* that binds their souls, she pulls on the *merzost*, bringing it within her clutches.

Darkness erupts. The wails and the ripping and the flapping of wings begins anew. Only her little pool of light around them and the others keeps the creatures back. Gleb cries beside them, trapped within this small bubble of safety. Trapped with a vengeful saint bent on ruination.

"Alina!" He shouts, though even through the bond he can feel that she is fighting, creating a shadow so deep that perhaps no one will ever escape it. It spreads through the city, racing through buildings and over streets. The people run, but they do not run fast enough. Instead of feeding only on her, it begins to feed on them. The more death it creates, the more it craves. "Alina, it's enough. The army is wiped out."

She grits her teeth. "It's not enough. They need to suffer."

Her fingers tremble, and her hair starts to fade. First grey, then white. Her eyes glow gold, no pupil or iris or anything, and they match her golden scars shining bright on her face.

He screams as she continues, dropping down to the earth. She falls in front of him, hands still cradling his face. He can feel that same darkness in his veins taking root. His skin cracks under the pressure, and he worries his head might explode if she doesn't stop. She will drain them both, just as he'd tried to drain the others.

"Alina, stop!" He holds onto her wrists, trying to pull her hands from his face. She doesn't move. He can't even tell if she's looking at him. "You're going to kill us both, and then what was it all for?"

She grimaces. "For vengeance."

"Then lets have our vengeance. We are not done today! We're not done."

Black bleeds down her wrists, and he is almost certain that it's coming from him. He will be as scarred as her, deep slashes of onyx marring his features.

The shadows cover half the city, creeping ever outward.

"I love you." He kisses her forehead, her hands never leaving his cheeks. "I love you. And I never let you say it back. Alinochka, please. We're not done. This isn't the end for us. Only for them."

He kisses her, his eyes shut tight. Her lips are warm beneath his. Perfect, just as they had been that night so long ago. He wants more of her. He wants everything.

But kisses do not heal all wounds, and though Alina's lips move in sync beneath his, she does not stop channeling his power. The carnage continues.

So he wraps his hands around her throat until she can no longer remain upright. Against her still lips, he whispers, "Beloved."

He shelters her limp body against him.

The darkness stops spreading, covering nearly the whole of the city.

Her light winks out around them.

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"Follow," he orders Gleb, voice ruff in the deprivation of all else. He carries Alina forward, praying that the edge of this night is still where he thinks it is.

He will return for the others later.

#### Chapter End Notes

Your comments mean the world to me. I have been very remiss about replying (mainly because I've been doing so much writing in the last few months that it takes up all of my free time), but if you drop a comment on this chapter, I promise I will give you all a personal thank you ❤️

# EPILOGUE

## Chapter Notes

This story did not originally have an epilogue — it was destined to end on the Fold and leave you hungry for more. But I had a few ideas about what I wanted to occur in the aftermath, and rather than simply telling them to you in an author's note, I decided to give you this final chapter.

This easily could've been a whole story on its own, but I hope you will enjoy these shorter vignettes anyway. Ironically, this epilogue is longer than any other chapter. I guess there was too much left to say!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's not glamorous, their tent on the edge of the fold, but it's not meant to be.

The cathedral hadn't been glamorous, and the cave he'd lived in before never was either. Being on the run for his whole childhood, her orphanage...

Their lives are a series of places that only ever served as a means to an end, and so too does their tent.

So it's not perfect, but when the king sends more men, frantic and afraid, to take stock of the new darkness that has slashed clean through his country, from the Sikurzoi in the south straight up to the forests north of Ulensk, Aleksander and Alina can watch them from a safe distance.

“We’re going to have to move soon. They’ll be taking stock of it — looking for signs of life. Signs of weakness in the wall. They’re only going to grow more desperate for a path to the ocean.”

She nuzzles deeper into the little nest of blankets he’s made up for her on the ground. Without opening her eyes, she says, “Fine, but not now.”

“What would you like to do now?”

“I’d like to sleep.”

He nods, imperious. “Then you shall have your rest.”

She whines. “I’m so tired, Sasha, only I can’t ever fall asleep. It used to be so much easier.”

He has kissed her a thousand times since the Fold — perhaps even a thousand kisses spent only in the moments after she woke up from his hands wrapped around her neck — but he

longs for more now. She is the finest wine, and somehow, no matter how much he might drink, he is always unsatiated. There is always that ache for a little bit more.

He brushes back the hair on her forehead, and her nose wrinkles up.

“It was easier in those days because you were eager to see me when you dreamt, even if you didn’t know it.” He grins, and though she lets out a small huff, she seems amused. “Kirsten could help you to sleep, if you allow her.”

“Kirsten won’t be back for hours. I’m restless *now*.”

Kirsten and the others, when they had awoken from a sleep so near to death that they had felt their own imminent departures, had asked many questions of him in the aftermath.

*Did you know how much energy it would take for you to make your weapon?*

*Did you mean to kill us, or did it get out of hand before you could rein it in?*

*Did you always mean to destroy the city — to kill all of the otkazat’sya, even those who weren’t a threat to us?*

And he had done what he’s learned to do best: lied.

Baghra may be far away in Kerch, hearing the stories of a wall of darkness through the grapevine, but her lessons stay with him. He is her son, and therefore he is a consummate liar.

*I didn’t know*, he’d said, and he’d allowed that dense kernel of care for them unspool itself once more in his chest. Not too much; not enough to overwhelm him. He does not want that kind of love anymore. He is a leader, and leaders need to see their subordinates as assets first and friends second. Only Alina is above that.

Even if a little piece of him loves Ilsa and Kirsten. And Luda. Sometimes Jacek. And Natalia. Daiyu, Konrad… all of them, really, in their own ways. But only a little.

*I didn’t know*, he’d lied, but then he’d tacked on a moment of truth, *but if I had, I might’ve tried it anyway. For the good of the Grisha. You must see how this gives us an advantage if we take it. There is nothing I would not do to see that through. I would’ve sacrificed myself, too, if that was the price.*

He’d done what he could to be certain that his own life wouldn’t be the price — he’d collected them expressly for that purpose — but he knows in his heart that he would’ve given all of himself that day if required. To see his weapon unfold before him was worth more than his life.

*You would’ve killed us?* Ilsa had asked.

He’d only nodded, and instead of getting upset or storming off or losing all respect for him, she’d nodded in return. In understanding, maybe. They’d all been minutes from death in Fjerda. Their numbers were up from the first day he’d met them, and if their deaths could have been made to *mean* something…

*But Alina stopped me. Alina saved you.*

And from then, whatever reservations they'd had about her had vanished. Some of them hadn't wanted to stay with *him*, but he'd reminded them that in the wake of an attack, the first true strike by the Grisha against their oppressors, there would be aftershocks. No *otkazat'sya* would even consider granting them clemency now. And so they stayed.

They'd stayed because he is still the better option, better than defending themselves against armies.

They'd stayed because he told them he has another plan. The coda to all of their hard work.

But they'd still chosen to set up their camp a quarter mile away. For privacy reasons, they'd claimed, and because Alina's screams could keep anyone from sleep on one of her bad nights.

He'd thought it only fair to give them their space. He'd rather have Alina to himself anyhow.

"I could have Kirsten come anyway. She's not far."

"Don't bother her," she says petulantly. "Put me to sleep yourself."

He quirks his brow, staring down at her. "You're far more insolent in this second life."

That's something new, too. Joking about what's happened. It was as though, in the aftermath of their creation that freed the darkness stewing inside of them, something had loosened in her chest. The weight that had been crushing her had been pulled away, her own strength a reminder that she was no longer powerless in the world.

"And I'll keep being insolent if you don't give me what I want."

"And what do you want, Your Holiness? Shall I brew you warm tea and personally ladle it into your mouth while singing Old Ravkan lullabies? Shall I rub your feet while recounting the tale of your glorious victory? What will be sufficient for your needs?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'm not quite so helpless, thank you." She hooks her foot around the back of his knee where he kneels over her, jerking until he falls forward. He nearly crushes her, but she doesn't seem to mind.

"Put me to sleep, Sasha."

He'd once imagined that on the first night he might spend with her — truly with her in the waking world — he would slide his hands beneath a dainty set of nightclothes embroidered with delicate pink roses. Even if he'd had to steal the money and buy such an outfit himself for a bride's chest, he never wavered from that belief. To peel that off of her would in itself be the gift.

She stares up at him, eyes wide, and for the first time since finding her again, he's certain that she wants him too. She is whole. Not wholly who she once was, but a mix of two creatures. The fractured memories of a simple, beloved past and the righteous anger and vindication

that she looks towards in a new future. She is bolder, and darker, and far closer to what he has become.

And he has never looking for a saint to love. Only a partner to worship. One who will match him in his darkness is all the better, as far as he is concerned.

He has only ever looked for his Alina.

And she wants now; loudly and without shame. She wants him.

A smile spreads slow and languid across his cheeks. “You might take what you want, you know. You’re strong enough to fight me for it now.”

“Too lazy. Next time, maybe.”

“If you really want to sleep,” he says, nudging his nose against hers before aligning their lips, “then I’ll have to tire you out. You’ll have to do some of the work.”

She shakes her head, making a little *nut-uh* sound before he muffles it with his kiss.

Once, once, once, in a lifetime never meant for them, they might’ve touched each other with nervous fingers. Might’ve kissed with hesitation, might’ve laughed as clothes were pulled away, at once both embarrassed and aroused.

It is not like that. There was only ever one path for them. A path where, whatever it is that they are, they are equals in it. Just as devious, just as dark. Just as needy and broken and desperately, deeply happy.

“Show me your light, *solnishka*. I want to see it.”

“Why—?” She tries to ask, but he keeps her lips occupied before pulling back just far enough to pepper kisses over her scars.

He has them too now, an inverse of hers. The darkness to her light. They are a matched set.

“Because I told you to. We are training. We always used to do that, you might remember. It’s time we start again.”

“Now?”

“The light, Alina,” he commands, this time without any humor in his voice. She obeys.

It starts at her hands, just a glow. “More.” He nuzzles into that space between her neck and jaw, licking at her skin.

It spreads over her, a warmth that travels across her skin a little at a time. When he peels away her *kefta*, he can see how she shines all over, lighting her up through her thin shift dress. The peaks of her breasts, her little belly button, the apex of her thighs — he can see it all, illuminated in a show only for him. A star, a saint, a goddess.

“Very good, Alinochka.”

“If I’m insolent,” she murmurs, trying to chase his lips with her own, but he ignores her and kisses down her throat to the top of her shift instead, “then you’re insufferable.”

“You look very pretty in this little dress, beloved. I think I should take it off you so I don’t spend all afternoon distracted.”

“Because what’s underneath won’t be—” She stops, gasping as he parts her legs to settle himself between them. His hand rubs small circles at the top of one thigh. So close. “Won’t be distracting at all,” she finishes, the words far less scathing than she’d started. She whines when he moves his hand away. “Come back.”

“Be good, *devushka*, and I will give you what you want.” He presses his lips to her nipple through the thin fabric, letting them sit there for a moment while her heart speeds up until finally he allows his tongue to lave at it. The shift grows damp, and the pink of the little bud becomes even more pronounced. “Have you done this before, Little Alina? In the orphanage?”

Even merely asking the question fills him with a cold, quiet rage. No hands are worthy to touch her. Her body — her *love* — is his to own. His to possess, his to take. It always has been, and now they are simply making up for lost time.

The way she squirms beneath him makes it clear enough that she does not mind being the jewel of his collection.

“No, Sasha.” She cradles his head to her chest, back bowing up from the ground in an effort to get him to suck harder. “Never. I don’t know how—”

“It is okay. I will teach you.”

In truth, he knows only a little more than her. No other woman has ever been enough for him, and it has only been at his most desperate that he’s considered tumbling another.

But he’s had a long time to consider this moment. A long time to think about what he might do to her. All the ways he dreamed of making her scream.

“Make it brighter,” he says, sliding his hands up her thighs, bringing her dress with them. She shifts beneath him, trying to get it off, so he slips it up her back until it’s bunched up just beneath her chin. Her whole body is bared to him, a sumptuous banquet, and without a second thought, he leans in again to bite at her nipple. To taste her skin beneath his tongue. It makes his head spin a little to have her at his mercy like this. “The light, Alina,” he reminds.

She lets out a sound of complaint. “Not now.”

“Yes now. I told you, we’re training. If you want to instill fear in the hearts of men, you’ll need to be ready.”

“I am ready,” she huffs, and for a second the need is gone from her voice, replaced with irritation. She, the woman who had created a wall of darkness? Who annihilated an army? To

be so underestimated by him? “You’ve seen my power.”

“I’ve seen your power in the midst of anger.” His fingers brush over her wet center, once, twice, before settling on her sweet little pearl. She muffles a groan. “Let us now see it when I’m trying very hard to distract you.”

She bares her teeth at him, filled with battle aggression, but her skin lights up brighter. It is so harsh that he almost can’t look at her, but more than that, he cannot look away. “You think the enemy will be doing *this* to distract me on a field of battle?”

He ignores her. No one will ever do this to her but him. He would cut off every finger of whoever tried and make them eat each one.

“Good Alya. So good. Very pretty.”

He picks up her legs, bending them until she is folded in half. Then he allows his mouth to settle over her cunt, exactly where it belongs.

“Fuck, *fuck*,” she breathes heavily, her hands darting down to twist in his hair. “Saints.”

“Alina,” he admonishes, watching as her light dims again. He swats at her center, light enough that it won’t truly sting, but enough to catch her attention. “I thought you wanted to be feared.”

“You’re a monster,” she says, hips bucking in a failed attempt to get some friction against his face. He hopes she catches the prickles of his beard if she’s going to be ornery.

“And I’ll make a very good story for little children to fear one day. If you want to inspire such terror, you’ll have to be a good girl and work harder.”

The light brightens again, and he returns to her, letting her sweet taste overwhelm him before his tongue moves back to her clit. He lets a finger slip into her wet center, and for a second her light flickers, but then she clenches her eyes shut and forces it back to full strength.

“Could I—” A ragged breath. “Could I instill fear in your heart?”

He pulls back again, though this time not to punish her. His finger keeps pumping within her, and he adds a second as recompense for the loss of his tongue. He moves up her body again — a kiss to her pelvis, her belly button, her breasts, her clavicle, her jaw, her nose, her lips.

“Oh, *milaya*,” he whispers, letting her taste herself on his tongue. “I could never be afraid of you.”

She whines before pulling him down into a deeper kiss. Her hips grind into his hand, trying to get more of everything.

“Will you fuck me, Sasha? Want you inside me.”

“If you ask very nicely.”

“Fuck. I want— Please, Sasha. I need you to fuck me.” Her legs come up around his torso, pulling him closer until his fully clothed body is aligned with her naked skin, his hand trapped between them. “Need to feel you.”

“Are you going to be a good girl?”

“Yes,” she groans. “So good. Only for you. So good for you, Sashulya.”

“Mm, I’m glad. But I think I’ll need proof first.” He adds a third finger, speeding them at as his thumb circles her clit. She cries out. “Show me how good you can be, sweet little Alya. Sweet just for me.”

When she comes, her pussy clenching around his fingers, the whole tent goes bright white. All he can think, besides how good, how *tight* she is, is that he’s lucky they’ve chosen to do this in the middle of the day. Her irregular sleep schedule has finally paid off.

“Sweet thing,” he says, kissing along her sweaty hairline as she comes back to herself. “How I adore you.” He would follow her anywhere, across the world and straight through death.

“That was—”

Her eyes are dazed, even as she tries to come up with a word, and he decides to help her.

“Enlightening, I think.” He laughs, pulling his fingers out of her to smear her musk over her lips before kissing it away. “We’ve learned that the sun really does shine out of your—”

“I’m going to kill you.”

His grin feels a little like her sunshine always does. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Are you going to fuck me or not?”

He noses his way back down her body, allowing himself the simple pleasure of memorizing the feel of her navel, her hipbones. She is the feast spread before him, and he is starving.

“I don’t know. I think you should give me one more before I even consider it.”

“Sasha—”

She does not get to finish her thought before his lips are on her again, and from there, the only sounds she makes are groans, and the only word she knows is the same one that she’d already uttered: his name.

He rings *two more* from her, which she tries without success to complain about, before he decides it really is rather uncomfortable to be fully dressed still when she is free.

“I’ve wanted this a long time,” she says, almost awed as she watches him disrobe. She does seem a little drowsier than before, her light softer as it illuminates her skin, and perhaps he will fuck her right into unconsciousness; will force so much pleasure from her body that there will be no place else for her to go.

“How long?”

Her fingertips dance across his bare chest, finally at liberty to touch. “A long time. You always... You...” She stops, sorting through memories. “You were always different. A little different every night. And from one to the next might not be so noticeable, but if I thought about how you looked at the beginning of the week versus the end... It was easy to see that you were changing — growing more defined, more handsome. And I was not.”

The back of his index finger brushes her breast. “I don’t think that’s true, *milaya*. I always noticed when you were changing. Blooming like a little rosebud.”

“And now you’re... what? Thirty five maybe? Forty?”

He smiles. “Closer to forty.”

“And I’m—” *Eighteen. Hundreds of years.*

“You’re exactly right, I think. Just as I remember you.”

She nods, trying to accept what he says as fact. “You’re exactly right, too. Every night I wanted you a little bit more.”

When he fucks into her, her tight cunt accepting him so perfectly, he knows it is true. He’s always known, but the world only seeks to prove him right again and again. She is tailored just for him.

He bites her shoulder as he thrusts into her, wanting to leave his mark. The rest of the world has had its chance — what is left of her is his now. Her marks and scars should come only from him.

Her tiny hand — so small, so sweet, so perfect in his own — comes around to grab his ass, desperate to bring him closer. He pushes her knees up to her ears, and her eyes roll back in her head. His hips grind into her again and again and again, needing friction.

“Give me the last of your light, Alina,” he hisses into her ear. “It’s mine. I want it.”

She scowls. “It’s not yours.”

He thrusts harder, hitting that place inside of her that makes her toes curl and her breath hitch. Her light blares back to full strength in spite of itself. “Isn’t it, pretty thing? Haven’t I owned a part of you for our whole lives?”

“Maybe— a—” She gasps. “A *part*.”

“And only having a part of you was enough then. But now I want it all. You’re going to give it to me, Alya, aren’t you?”

She throws her head back, his fingers forcing her back to the brink. So close. It is so easy to bring her here, to topple her from her high tower.

“Saints.”

She pulses around him, shuddering through her pleasure, and he only just manages to withstand it himself. As soon as she finishes, he pulls out, giving his cock a few final strokes before spending on her stomach.

Her light goes out, a candle that has been extinguished.

Even knowing that he will see it on her cheeks and feel far too proud at the sight, she still wears a sated smile when she looks up at him.

He leans forward, kissing her forehead before pulling back to find something to clean her with.

“You didn’t have to pull out, you know,” she says, idly dragging her fingers through his cum. Burdened by curiosity, she brings her fingertips to her mouth, running them over her lips before licking it away with little darts of her tongue.

Something stirs in his chest. If he didn’t know how tired she is, he would ask her to go again.

Instead he finds a spare scrap of fabric — a part of his shirt torn in the battle — and cleans the rest of her off, though she protests.

“Yes I did. Don’t be ridiculous.” Then, to himself, he mutters, “What do they teach you in those orphanages?”

“I know the repercussions, Sasha. I’m just saying that you didn’t *have to*. It would have been okay if you didn’t. I knew what I was getting into when we started.”

When he looks at her again, there is something soft in her eyes. Though she has not said that she loves him yet, he can see it there. He can see it.

He brings her hand to his lips, kissing that too. He has kissed nearly all of her today, and it is still not enough.

“Not until I’ve won you a crown, *milaya*.”

He lays down, tucking her into his side. It is not late. The sun still blazes outside the tent, and he should be doing anything other than this. He should be rendezvousing with the others. He should be watching the army. He should be planning how best to attack Os Alta.

But he holds her. He holds her because she is here, and because once he had imagined that she would never be here again.

“Will you dream of me?” He asks as she drifts off against him. His nose buries itself in the hair at the top of her head.

“Mm,” she mumbles, cuddling closer. “What else would I care to dream about?”

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When he sleeps, he sees her. In a field. In a forest. In a cathedral. Everywhere and nowhere, but always close.

He isn't sure if it's really her, and he isn't sure if it matters. Not when she is all over him, entwined so deeply with every breath.

But when he is pulled from rest, she smiles at him, and he thinks she must have seen him, too.

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It's not until weeks later, when the cool spring air has given way to warm summer, that he makes good on his promise.

He watches her dress in her *kefta*, eyes lingering on the way that she armors herself for war. The heavy black fabric wrapped around her — protecting her — does something to his head.

They'd made more *keftas* with the help of the others. Their team wore them now too: Kirsten, Luda, and the other corporalki in red, Ilsa, Peter, and the etherealki in blue, and Konrad in purple.

(It is not until a fight between Ilsa and Jacek breaks out a year later that they think to give the others their own unique stitching to represent the different skills. Ilsa preens and takes credit, and the armies look so proud of their colors that he lets her carry on.)

Alina has four new black and gold *kefta*, each more beautiful than the last. It was always his goal to outfit her with dozens. When he'd thought he would have hundreds of years waiting for her to be born, the idea of making her clothing in the meantime had grounded him. Now he will have to have them made for a queen. There will be whole teams of people to help him give her the closet she deserves.

But when she dresses that day, readying herself for battle, she wears the first one. The one that, even now, has bloodstains that mar the detailing. The gold is not so bright underneath those marks, but she does not reach for another one from her kit.

"If they are to fear me," she says, looking up at Kirsten as she secures a black and golden *kokoshnik* into Alina's hair, "then I want to be sure to give them something worth fearing."

"I don't think you need clothes for that, Alina," Kirsten says, voice admonishing, but there's a cheekiness to it too.

“It will be a quick battle,” Aleksander reminds them both. “But if you want to start your reign as the avenging goddess, then I see no better time to start.”

He had offered, on numerous occasions, to let him take the blame. Not because he wants it — not because he feels it is his due to be the greatest monster in the room, though he might enjoy it enough — but because she has been so *loved*. Even if she did not know it, she has been loved by these people. And their love can be another tool, just as their hate can. Just as their fear can.

But she’s steadfast, resolute in her goals. He does not have to rewrite the story, making her the victim of the evil Darkling who raised her from the dead and turned her into his pet. She will win Os Alta, win the kingdom, and she will do it as the avenging saint, not as his puppet.

Alina nods, touching her hair, making sure that everything is neat. When she stands, even he is caught by her radiance. The nobles won’t know what hit them.

“It will be quick,” she repeats, a promised litany. “How are the others?”

Kirsten rises as well, fixing the cuffs of her *kefta*. “They are organizing. We are not used to numbers of this size, but they will be ready shortly. Everyone knows their missions.”

In the wake of the darkness, the rift that has become known as the Shadow Fold, Grisha had started coming to them. In fear, in terror, in hope. They had heard the rumors that it was caused by a rogue group of witches. For many, the protections that could be offered by such a group were enough to risk the journey away from their homes.

Now they have over sixty warriors. They range in skill and age, but all except the very youngest are willing to travel to the capital and bring down the king. When they look at Alina and Aleksander, they don’t see destruction. Or, perhaps more aptly, it isn’t all they see. It is destruction that they can build upon. And whatever else they have found in their leaders, they have decided it is enough to be worth the risk.

Their little band of twelve will lead the charge, his trusted lieutenants.

“Then let’s not waste any more time. Alina.” He holds out his hand to her, palm up. She steps forward, taking it as if they are going to do a dance in a tiny town’s summer solstice festival. “May the world we dream about soon be of our making.”

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It had taken some time to get all the information they needed. They had greased palms in the only way rubleless outlaws could — Alina had offered those who helped them safe passage to the other side of the Fold. To the sea, to hope, to the perception of prosperity.

The process was slow, but it hardly mattered. They had done it — had learned all there was to know about the secret passages under the city, had studied them until everyone involved in

the mission knew the ins and outs of each corridor.

Every group knows their targets. Jacek's group will take the general's palace. Luda's will go to the tsar's brother's home, and Natalia's will handle the tsar's sister's. Kirsten's group will secure the armory before merging with the main party.

Alina will take the barracks. She will teach the army to fear her, and then maybe after that, to love her too. There is no loyalty to a weak tsar, and soon enough Anastas the Usurper will be weak in their eyes. Those who are wise will turn towards the promise of strong leadership.

And Aleksander, with his flair for the dramatic, will take the Grand Palace.

Alina had argued with him for weeks, insistent that *she* should take the tsar's palace. At the very least they should take it together. It is symbolic, if nothing else.

He hadn't cared one way or the other, but he knew she would have a better chance of swaying the army to join them than he would. They may be terrified of her — may have heard the stories of the wraith who rose from the dead to seek her revenge — but still they prayed to her. Today of all days, the Feast of Sankta Alina, they will pray for her mercy and guidance. And she can grant it to them, in a manner of speaking.

He'd had to promise her, on pain of a terrible death at her hand, that he will not kill the tsar until she returns to him. By then, she will either have an army at her heels ready to defend her, or else the barracks will need a thorough cleaning to wash away all the blood.

That is the plan. The plan they've devised over months of effort. And yet, when he watches her leave him, taking a different tunnel to her destination, his heart lurches anyhow. He knows that she is formidable. He knows that the fury still runs hot in her veins, driving her on.

He says a prayer anyway. Because now, more than ever before, he knows that some saints truly are capable of miracles. And though he knows she wasn't pulled back from death because of the pages dedicated to her in the *Istorii Sankt'ya* or the churches that claimed to own her bones, the prayer still holds weight. It holds the whole of his hope, and he utters it without shame.

"Keep her safe."

Ilsa, too nosy, too knowing, shoves at his shoulder before tempering his irritation with a kiss to his cheek. "I will, *Sasha*." Then, smiling, she follows behind Alina, ready to take the barracks together.

Aleksander wipes Ilsa's imagined spit off his cheek, feigning disgust. He does not know who for. There is no one here of consequence to care.

He likes to convince himself that she isn't still worming her way into his life, the annoying little sister he's never wanted.

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When Alina returns to him, covered in blood and all the more resplendent for it, the prisoners of the Grand Palace have been bound by his shadows. They circle around their heads like blindfolds, forcing them into a world of their own darkness. A Shadow Fold of their very own.

“The army?” He asks.

“What is left of the army is outside, hailing the dawn of a new era after escorting me here through the streets. I don’t care if they mean it — they chant *sol koroleva* with enough enthusiasm to please me for today.”

“And how much is left of the army, Sol Koroleva?” He brushes back a few stray locks of her hair that have come free. Her grand *kokoshnik* is miraculously still on her head.

She grins, the dried blood on her cheeks cracking. “Enough.”

He smiles too, and the tsar makes a guttural sound at their feet, still fighting against his bonds.

“Would you like to do the honors?” He asks, gesturing forward. “I saved him as promised. Our prized pig.”

She looks around, observing the room. Most of the tsar’s ministers had been in a cabinet meeting that afternoon, as planned. The rest of the city had been observing the feast day, half in terror and half in faith, but the tsar had bigger problems to worry about with enemies on all sides and no way out. The solstice celebrations were of no concern.

Alina kicks at the foot of one of the ministers, and the man jerks back in fear. He wears ornate clothing, bright with the costly fabrics beloved by the nobles.

“I think,” she says ponderously, “that the tsar might be your monster.”

He smirks at her, watching her progress through the room. “Are you giving me permission? You’re not going to flay me alive if I kill him then?”

“Just this once.”

“Very magnanimous. You really are far too much trouble, Alinochka.”

She turns back to him, face lit up. “But I get all the rest.”

He thinks it over, looking around the room. “There are a few we’ll need to keep. Ones who aren’t so loyal, or else ones who we’ll have to bring under our thumb if we have any hope of a transition that isn’t plagued by disaster.”

“You might be giving them too much credit.”

“Perhaps. Do you trust me?”

She doesn’t answer immediately, but her response is all the surer for it somehow. “Yes.”

“Then I will show you who to spare. The rest, *milaya*, are at your mercy.”

“Pity,” she says, brushing at the crusted blood on her hands. The men around them, still blinded but perfectly able to hear her, tense. “I have very little of that left.”

He marks out which to skip and motions her on before slinking over towards the tsar.

“Will you uncover their eyes, Sashanka?” She calls from across the room. “I want them to see me.”

“Of course.” His hand swipes the air, and without pause, the shadows covering their faces melt away.

Then he leaves her to her duty.

The only person left in the room who still has his eyes covered is the tsar himself. Aleksander squats down before him, keeping the advantage of height on his side. He has never wanted to be below this man, physically or metaphorically, and now he never will be again.

“Do you regret it?” He asks curiously, tipping the tsar’s head up with a hand beneath his chin. Anastas fights against his bindings but says nothing. He plays the role of the dignified prisoner as if that will save him. “Taking the throne from the Orkiva dynasty? Continuing the persecution of the Grisha?” Anastas snaps his teeth together, trying to take a bite out of Aleksander’s hand. He only laughs at the sight of an emperor brought low. “I could have been just as happy doing this to their family instead of yours,” he reminds him.

Of course, the Lansovs were related to the Orkivas, a cadet branch of the family tree that had split off generations before. If he had wanted to root out the monster and kill every last claimant, he would’ve smoked out this line as well. But he does not say that.

“You might’ve saved yourself this fate if you’d only cared more about your people. Might’ve come to the throne and made a lasting change, but instead you grew fat and lazy, a usurper with no real plans except to fill his own purse. You would’ve been better served not to bother at all.”

“The saints will damn you,” Anastas says, spitting blindly at Aleksander. It lands on his chin. He wipes it away far more nonchalantly than he’d wiped away Ilsa’s kiss.

“I don’t know, Lansov. A saint sleeps in my bed, and I don’t think she minds much what I will do to you today. You’re just lucky she didn’t insist on killing you herself. You can hear the way your ministers scream.” The sounds aren’t far off, only at the other end of the wide room, but the bubble around the two of them seems almost to mute everything save their own voices. But when Aleksander mentions it, he knows that Anastas clues in, listening intently to those horrid wails.

“Then get it over with. Only let me stand like a gentleman and die on my feet.”

“No,” he says, sending out a small burst of the Cut to sever one of Anastas’s hands from the wrist. He will work his way up. “I don’t think I’ll be following any more orders from you. You can go to your death in the dark.”

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When he reaches Alina’s side again among the lifeless bodies, there is fresh blood running down her chin, but she isn’t any more bothered by it than she is the dried stuff under it.

She wipes her hands off on her *kefta*. He might be angrier about it — this one had been that very first gift, that small anchor to his own sanity while she had been gone — but it’s a trophy of conquest now. Perhaps he will hang it in the great hall for all guests of the palace to see; a reminder of exactly what their little queen is capable of doing to them if they misbehave.

“Come, *devushka*,” he says, offering her his own bloodstained hand. “Let us show them what their prayers have brought them.”

They walk out onto the balcony. Outside is controlled chaos, though the control is mild at best. There are buildings on fire in the distance — those same ones that the other raiding parties had attacked. Now that the city is taken, the tidemakers will be going to put out any remaining flames.

The people, though, are not running from the fires. The grand city houses are not theirs. They live on the other side of the river, in the poorer half of Os Alta. They have only come today for the celebration: to pray in the church to receive the sankta’s blessing and to visit the palace to receive the tsar’s.

How considerate that they may now do it all at once.

When they walk out on the balcony, Alina’s hand is in his right and his prize is in his left.

“People of Ravka.” He raises his hand high over his head, and he hears even from across the distance the muffled gasps of shock. “I have here the head of the usurper king, the snake who has pulled us away from the Sankta’s light. He killed our tsar and punished our Grisha. The saints cursed us with a blight upon our lands because of him.”

His shadows creep out through the crowd, terrifying people when they realize that the dark isn’t natural. Not the sun behind a cloud but something far more sinister.

It doesn’t matter that the old tsars punished the Grisha too. It doesn’t even matter that every person in the crowd and their *babya* knows it. It only matters what he can make them believe here and now. It only matters what grandiose tale he can weave.

“But one of your saints is returned to you, come to be your tsaritsa and to usher in the light of a new age. A sun summoner,” he proclaims proudly, because even now he will not have

anyone thinking she isn't Grisha. That somehow her gifts are *different* and therefore *acceptable*. If they fear the squaller, they should fear the sun summoner. But more importantly, if they love the saint, they should love the squaller, too. "A Grisha of immense talents who will lead by my side to show you what Ravka can become."

He pauses, looking at her, and with an eye roll that only he is privy to, she raises both of her hands, letting starlight pool out of them and into the darkness of the crowd.

The people gasp in awe.

"Mercy!" They cry. "Sankta!"

"Just Ravkans will have mercy," she says loudly, voice commanding. She does not tell them what it is to be a just Ravkan, but soon enough they will know. Soon the whole nation will know, under no uncertain circumstances, what they are no longer permitted to do if they wish to have the sankta's mercy. "My blessings upon all who are worthy of them."

She turns to leave the balcony, the *kefta* swishing out behind her where the bottom has torn, but he pulls her back. Not for long — there is nothing left to be said that cannot wait. Tonight the people will celebrate the feast day, or perhaps they will mourn. Whatever they must do to get on with their lives. The decrees will come tomorrow.

But for now, he kisses her for the world to see. A claim. A tether.

No one will have the tsaritsa but him. No one.

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They have studied the blueprints for the buildings extensively, so undoubtedly she knows where he is leading her, but she still sighs in relief when he brings her to a bed chamber.

Not the tsar's, but that will come. He's already ordered one frightened servant to find a group to begin clearing out Anastas's things. If there's one thing he's sure of, it's that the interior design was likely gaudy and atrocious, and he'd rather spare himself having to see any of it.

But more importantly, he'd ordered a second servant — equally terrified — to prepare a bath for the tsaritsa.

(He will have to think of that. Another thing for tomorrow's list. First the Grisha, of course. An order banning their executions, and another proclaiming the death of anyone who attacks a Grisha unprovoked.

He has a headache already just thinking about the arguments that will cause.

But after that, when the most important steps have been taken, he'll have to look over the tsar's accounts. The surest way to ease the servants' minds is to give them a few extra rubles

for their troubles.)

When Alina sees the bath, full of hot water and sweet smelling oils, she nearly collapses.

“*Moya solnishka*,” he whispers, gathering her to his chest so that she does not fall. He helps her to unbutton her *kefta*, pushing it off her shoulders.

Carefully, he sits her on the edge of the wide tub, pulling off first her boots and then her trousers, shirt, and smallclothes.

“Are you tired?” He asks when she leans her forehead down onto his shoulder. Without jostling her too much, he helps her shift into the deep tub, the heat of the water rising up around her.

She lets out a little moan, sinking into it. “No, Sasha. Not tired. I’m very happy.”

He gives her a glare before picking her hand up out of the water to kiss her fingertips. They are still red, the blood wet again but still trapped in the grooves of her skin, but he does not mind. These hands can kill, and he likes that almost more than anything else about them.

“You are tired. I can see it. It’s okay; it’s been a long day.”

She leans her head back, safe with him. “Maybe a little. I’m always a bit tired these days.”

He nods as he begins to massage soap into her hand, cleaning away the stains. She is constantly worn down, like the mere act of being alive takes up much of the day’s energy.

But that is what he is for: to prop her up, to keep her safe. That is what he will do.

“Then rest, beloved. I will do this for you.”

She opens her eyes, staring sightlessly into this grand room around them. It’s far nicer than anything either of them is used to. They did not grow up in marble rooms and grand estates. He will not let either of them forget that along the way. They will never become as wasteful and useless as the other tsars. The best leaders are the ones who are always a little bit hungry.

She does not help him, allowing Aleksander to do all the work. He takes the washcloth and tenderly cleans every inch of her skin from the spoils of battle. When the bath starts to run red, he has the servants come in and change the water.

Alina hardly speaks, but she watches. And whenever he stops to squeeze her hand comfortingly, she always squeezes back.

“Will you dream of me?” He asks, curious. It is an innocuous enough question in light of the day’s events. It is the same one that he poses almost every night now. “When you sleep tonight?”

She turns her head on the rim of the tub, her white hair wet from where he’s had to wash the blood out of *that* too, and she looks at him with languid eyes. “What else would I care to

dream of?" She raises her hand out of the water, no rush to the action, and it drips when she cups his cheek. "What else is there, when you are all that I love?"

He smiles, warmth suffusing straight through him.

It's not true, strictly speaking. She has come to love Kirsten, and Ilsa, and nearly all of their cohort. She will meet countless Grisha throughout her lifetime, and she will learn to love many. Too many, maybe.

But there is no one but him who will withstand time with her. When all the others are dead and gone from the world, he will still be there, still holding her hand and asking her to dream of him.

And more than that, it doesn't matter. He *should be* all that she loves. She is everything, and now he will be the same. The whole world, the greatest light.

"I love you too," he whispers, kissing just between her brows. There will be centuries to come of those same words, and he knows somehow that they will always feel just like this: a little wrong, and also perfectly right.

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The funniest thing, in hindsight, is the unimaginably antiquated things the old ministers find issue with.

It's not the acceptance of the Grisha as full citizens of Ravka.

Granted, that would have been a greater issue if Aleksander hadn't threatened to kill anyone at the table without hesitation if they opposed him. But still, no one fights, and that's what matters.

It's not a new tsar and tsaritsa from peasant backgrounds who only barely understand the nation's complex governance. That can be taught. The ministers will not risk their heads for that.

No, the thing that the council members harp back on again and again is: *how can Alina and Aleksander rule as tsaritsa and tsar if they aren't married?*

If he didn't know any better, he would think he had planted that idea in their heads himself, if only to make the case to Alina that *really, our marriage would be good for Ravka. The people need to see that their leaders are strong, unified. They need something to hope for, and weddings give them that.*

He would've let the idea linger, sitting in her head until it started to sound too rational. Until she wondered why they weren't already married.

But the ministers do it all for him, and he's secretly grateful.

It all falls into his lap with surprising grace and ease.

"You know," he says, turning towards his future bride, "a joint coronation-wedding would save Ravka money, in the long run." She looks down at the ledgers, which are so messy that they have not managed to parse them out even after weeks of trying. Then she raises a skeptical brow at him. "It's economical, *solnishka*."

When they are in private again, he fucks her up against the wall, harsh and quick and desperate.

Against his neck, she pants, "Think... you just—*fuck*—want to make me..." She bites down on her lip, holding in a moan. "Make me Alina... Aleksandrova Morozova."

"And if I do?" He asks, sucking a bruise into her skin.

Her face contorts, switching between emotions too quickly to settle on anything. There's anger at his presumptions, there's the need to have him closer, buried inside her, and there's desire, too. The kind of desire that softens a face. The kind that presents to you the one thing that you've never had and dares you to turn it away.

Alina has never had a family. Never had a name that bound her to someone else. The Starkovs, whoever they were, were a phantom family. And though she may be proud of her name, the need to belong is powerful.

"You'll have to make me," she says finally, a challenge. She wants him to force her, he knows, so that she need not ever admit to what it is she wants from him. She will never need to be vulnerable if she can only force his hand.

And he is an amiable tyrant.

"Then I will drag you down the aisle, Alinochka. I am not afraid of your bite."

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They marry just as the leaves begin to turn gold, as her kingdom of sun and summer cedes ground to his own kingdom of darkness and decay.

Their story began in a meadow all those years ago; an imagined place in the corner of their minds. It began a second time in a cathedral, just a man and the lost saint he prayed to.

It ends in a cathedral, too: or perhaps it begins anew for a third time. A new life, that of the Morozov dynasty.

Not the same cathedral. This one is in the heart of Os Alta, dedicated to some other, lesser saint. It's filled to the brim with friends and enemies, all there to see the crowning and marriage of their new leaders.

Even with dozens of people in the room who want them dead, he still prefers this room. She will never step in that dreaded other church again. It lies buried in the Fold, lost to everyone but her, and she will never willingly uncover it. May the volcras enjoy it now.

The crown sits heavy on his head when she places it there, the gold and jewels too elaborate for his taste. But Alina had reminded him that the way to command respect is to make it obvious that it is owed, and this crown is an overt enough reminder.

He places the smaller of the two crowns on her own brow, watching as she rises beneath it. It does not dwarf her. In every way, she ascends to meet its demands. Soon enough she will exceed them. A queen in name as well as in deed.

The cleric tries to cut in, having them say the arcane, meaningless words of the Ravkan tradition. But there was a reason he had not crowned them himself. Aleksander wouldn't allow it. They earned these titles, and they will bestow them upon themselves. They do not need the church to prop them up; the church bows to *them*.

And it is the same for their vows. Aleksander has never been a Ravkan. Not in the ways that matter — the Ravkans never accepted him into their own. He will not use their words. He will not swear their oaths, not to the country and not to his blushing bride. He knows exactly what it is he will say. A new tradition — one meant only for their people.

*Your face*, she'd said that day, horrified by her own existence. Horrified at the lingering fear that she knew him from somewhere but didn't know why. *I've seen it.*

He laughs now at the thought of those words, at the way that they had stabbed a shard of ice into his chest. He has her now, and he can laugh about those dark moments. About those first words that had reunited them, as silly as they had been.

Turning to her now, he looks down into her warm eyes — eyes that have seen bloodshed and only called for more — and says the truth that has sat waiting in his chest. "I will march with you in times of war. I will rest with you in times of peace. I will forever be the weapon in your hand," he draws her fingers up to his lips, kissing them, "the fighter at your side, and the lover who awaits your return."

*Your face. I've seen it.*

"Alina Starkov, I have seen your face in the making at the heart of the world, and there is no one more beloved. There is no one as brave or unbreakable." He leans in, his words but a breath against her temple for Alina's ears alone. "I love you."

When he looks at her, he can see only hope. His hope, born somewhere between incandescence and darkness and twisted until it looks almost broken, almost perfect.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this, left a comment, cursed me out for the whole middle bit of this story, or just came along for the ride. Joining this fandom has been such a welcoming experience, and I've so enjoyed getting to know so many of you and seeing your crazy theories.

I hope to be able to write more darklina in future, but for now I'm taking a break to participate in my first nanowrimo. It'll likely be a while before I post any more fics, so if you don't mind leaving me one last comment for the road, I will love you endlessly for it.

End Notes

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